"MINERVA JOHNICAN LOOKS BACK"
AN INTERVIEW WITH MINERVA J. JOHNICAN

BY ALMA R. BUCOVAZ
ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE
MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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MARCH 18, 1990

BY ALMA R. BUCOVAZ

TRANSCRIBER: ALMA R. BUCOVAZ

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

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PLACE Memphis, Tennessee

DATE March 18, 1990

X Minerva J. Johnson

(INTERVIEWEE)

X Alma R. Brewer

(For the Mississippi Valley Archives of the John Willard Brister Library of Memphis State University)

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THIS IS A PROJECT OF THE ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE AT MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY. THE TITLE IS "MINERVA JOHNICAN LOOKS BACK." THE PLACE IS MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE. THE DATE IS MARCH 18, 1990. THE INTERVIEWEE IS MISS MINERVA JOHNICAN. THE INTERVIEWER IS ALMA RUTH BUCOVAZ, A STUDENT IN THE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY. TRANSCRIBED BY ALMA RUTH BUCOVAZ.

Tape 1, Side 1.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Good morning, Minerva.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Good morning, how are you?

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Fine, thank you. Let us begin with your telling us something about your background as a child. I believe you were born in Memphis, were you not?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, I am a native Memphian. I was born here in the house I now live in. As a matter of fact, I don't think my Mother got to the hospital. I think a mid-wife helped to bring me into this world. [Laughter] Then I think they called the doctor to see if everything was all right. I was the sixth child of seven children from my Mother and Father, and I have a brother who is younger than I. He is the baby in the family. I was brought up in a family that just learned the values and principles--old fashioned morals and principles--from our family, and it was hard. We had a hard life. Daddy was

working first as a maintenance man. As long as I can remember, Daddy had several jobs, but when I remember him, he was a maintenance man at one of the housing projects in Memphis, the old Dixie Homes over on Poplar. I recall him working there, but I don't remember too much in those early days. Later, Daddy became a builder. He built a lot of churches in Memphis. And I recall Daddy doing work that people do today and make a lot of money. He did the work then and made a little money. He hired men to work for him, and he liked to pay his people well. Daddy was a kind and unselfish person. My Mother used to argue with him and say, "You make all of that money and you pay everybody else and bring nothing home." But of course, we lived; we made it. A lot of times we had beans for dinner, but when we went out, we looked well fed and healthy. And we were well fed.

I recall one thing that is probably the most memorable to me, Alma Ruth, and that is just before one Christmas. We didn't have any bicycles in the family. One of my brothers named Paul wanted a bicycle. Reverend McDaniel and his family lived next door to us. He was a well known, prominent person in the black community. He was an out spoken person; always fighting on issues; and he was well respected by blacks and whites. His young boy, Joseph, had a bicycle. Paul asked to ride it, and Joseph pushed him off. They were friends, but Joseph pushed him off, and that really hurt Paul.

Paul came in the house crying and told my Daddy, and

Daddy asked what he was crying about. Paul told Daddy that it was because he wanted a bicycle and Joseph wouldn't let him ride his bicycle. So Daddy said, "That does it, I'm going to get a bicycle." Now, we knew that he would buy one bicycle, but Christmas was right around the corner, and we had no idea that Daddy would buy five. There were five of us younger kids at home.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Five bicycles at one time?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: He went out and bought five bicycles, and with no money hardly, but good credit, good respect. Marice Shainberg owned a hardware store in the neighborhood on McLemore and Bellevue, and he and my Mother went up there. They had discussed it around a little round oak table that we had in the kitchen, and they decided. We didn't know all of this. We knew that we were going to get one, but he bought five, and everyone of us had a bicycle. He told us, "Now you get out there and ride those bicycles up and down the street and let everybody know that the Johnicans have bicycles." [Laughter] We were proud people, humble but proud people.

Another occasion I remember quite frequently was when Daddy and "Madear" first wanted a television. When I was a little girl, televisions were really a luxury. We used to listen to the radio--"The Shadow Knows" and all of those programs--we would crowd around the radio, turn the lights out and make it scary-like. I remember when television first came out, the Muntz TV. Reverend McDaniel again beat us to

the punch. [Laughter] He bought a big Muntz TV for his family, and of course, we kids wanted to go over and see it. Mrs. McDaniel just about got tired of us in her living room every day watching TV. She was a sweet lady, but we could feel that she got tired of having children there so often. Sometimes we went when they weren't even home.

So Mother decided that she had to get us a TV. My Mother was this kind of a person. She just went out and bought our first TV, a True Tone, at Western Auto. (I just recently got rid of it). The screen was about nine inches. When she bought that TV, she told the people to deliver it about 4:00 o'clock when the school kids would be coming home, so everybody would know that we had a TV. [Laughter] We were really proud.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Your Father was in politics, or at least interested in politics, wasn't he?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Daddy never really was interested in politics. As I said, Reverend McDaniel was our good friend next door. He had seven kids. There were seven kids in our family also--two of the girls were married--but five of the younger ones were at home. Reverend McDaniel had seven, but his older two were not quite as old as our two older sisters. Reverend McDaniel used to come over all the time and sit on our porch. At that time, you know, air conditioners were not prominent, so we would sit on the porch and talk about the events of the day after everyone had dinner. We always believed in newspapers in our family.

The children and everybody read the newspaper. Even today, I can't make it if I don't get up and read the newspaper. (This morning, I am late coming over here to do this interview because I read the paper first). So one day--it had to have been about 1945--Reverend Mc came over to sit on our porch and talk.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: 1945?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: I am assuming it was about that time because I was about six or seven years old. At that time the Crump Machine was barely beginning to crack, and Reverend McDaniel was known all over the city as a big fighter against the Crump Machine. I didn't know this story about my Daddy that I am going to tell you until Reverend McDaniel told it to me the first time I ran for public office. He introduced me to a political group when I first ran for office back in 1972, and as he introduced me to the group, he told this story, and it was the first time I had ever heard it.

Reverend Mc came over to sit on our porch and talk, and he convinced my Daddy to work in his precinct back in 1945. Daddy said, "I am just not that interested in politics." Daddy was never a political person. Reverend Mc said, "Well, Mr. Johnican, you need to be interested because we are paying a poll tax; you need to be interested because Crump has this machine, and we will never get anywhere with this machine." With the many things he said, he convinced my Daddy to go out and work the precinct, knock on doors, get some people registered, and get them to vote.

At that time we were trying to get Senator Estes Kefauver elected. He was the peoples' candidate, and Crump had his own candidate. So my Father decided he would just work the 26th Ward, which was the ward in which we lived and the ward I still live in today. Daddy went out and knocked on some doors. Now Daddy was so--I guess you call it apolitical--he was so apolitical that he had no idea that he was not supposed to do that. Daddy was working then at the Dixie Homes as a maintenance man. When he went back to work and about two weeks later, the word got out that he had helped the Estes Kefauver campaign on that very, very, very low level, and he was fired from his job. Now Reverend McDaniel told me this story in 1972.

So Daddy was fired from his job. Reverend McDaniel said it was the best thing for my Father because my Father had a talent that he hadn't really developed, and that was building houses and drawing plans. He was never schooled for it. He never went to school to learn how to be a carpenter, to learn how to draft or to draw plans, but he did it. When he found out that he didn't have a job, he had to go out and make a living for his family the best way he could, so he went out and started building houses and churches. Many of the black churches in Memphis, especially some of the older ones, Daddy built. As a result of him standing up for what he believed in, he developed into one of the great builders in Memphis. In his time, Mr. Johnican was well known for building.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: In a sense by accident because he

opposed the Crump political machine, he was propelled into becoming a well known builder.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: I didn't know about Daddy doing this until 1972 when Reverend McDaniel told me as he introduced me. He said this may have been a spark. Daddy never talked too much about politics. We always believed in voting. We were brought up believing in voting, but I didn't know this about Daddy. I didn't even know it in college. I didn't know this about Daddy until I decided to run for a State Representative job. That may have very well inspired me to be a politician. But I guess the thing that I really remember the most about becoming a politician was something that happened when I got in college.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Did you go to high school in Memphis?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Hamilton High School. I went to Hamilton Elementary and Hamilton High School.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: And then where did you go to college? You went to Ohio, wasn't it?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: My first year I went to Central State [in Ohio]. I won a scholarship. Daddy died my senior year in high school. Daddy had a heart attack and died. I really got worried because I knew that "Madear" was not going to be able to send me to school on just the annuity she would be getting from Daddy's death and all, and I was really worried about that, so I went one day and talked to the principal, Mr. Harry T. Cash. I told Mr. Cash, "I am

really worried because I want to go to college; I have good grades; I just need your help." Well, Daddy knew him very well. My father had built my principal's house, and Mr. Cash thought a lot of my father. So he said to me, "Minerva, let me look around and find something for you because I certainly want you to go to college. I know your Mother is going to have a hard time." So Mr. Cash found me two or three awards, some cash awards, an award from the AKA Sorority, and a four-year scholarship to Wilberforce, Ohio.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Was this a teachers' college?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: It was a liberal arts school.

I went off to Wilberforce on a four-year scholarship. Of course, when we got to Wilberforce, it wasn't what we thought it was. The school was not accredited; it had lost its accreditation. The state side had broken up from the church side, and I was on the church side where they left nothing. The state side was the big school that was flourishing.

So after I had been there for a while and found out that I wasn't going to be happy at that school, I walked over to Central State. I was a politician and didn't know it. [Laughter] I walked over to Central State and told them that I wanted to come over there, and they asked me how much money I had. I told them I didn't have any. They asked me if I would be willing to work. I said that I will work. They said, "How would you like to work in the library?" I said, "I'll try." Right then she looked at my transcript and was

impressed with it. She said, "We are going to give you a work-aid scholarship, and we will get your AKA Scholarship transferred over here, and you are in school." I got some fellows to help me pack my things and transfer them across the ravine, because the schools were divided by a ravine then, and I went over to Central State.

I did all of this without my Mother's help because my Mother wanted me to come back home and go to LeMoyne. She was just fed up with me calling on the phone, crying, and wanting to change schools. So I did all of this, and then I called my Mother and told her that I was over at this other school; that I had gotten in; and that I would be there a year. I knew that I would be there at least one year, but my Mother always worried about me being that far.

"Madear" was sick with some heart problems, and I didn't want to be too far from her, so when I had completed one year there at Central State, I decided that I would go to Tennessee State, which was closer to home.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Is this in Nashville?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, I worked under a scholarship there.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Did you work in the library there?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: I worked in the library all the while I was in college, and I put that with the monies my Mother could afford and with the scholarship and the different kinds of grants I could get. My Mother never had to pay a penny for my education except for a portion of my sophomore year.

While I was at Tennessee State, I joined the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and became the campaign manager for the Miss TSU contest. It was the tradition that the AKA Sorority always won the Miss TSU. Alpha Phi Alpha, our fraternity brother organization, always won the President of the Student Council. We would put a coalition together and we always beat. We had the smartest kids, the brightest kids, and the most popular kids on campus. So this one particular year--my senior year--all the other sororities and fraternities decided that they were going to put their coalition together. This nation-wide coalition building was talked about all over the campus and in all political circles.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: This was within the sorority then?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, you see, if you were on the campus, to really be into what was happening, you had to be in the sororities and fraternities. I was a big wheel in Alpha Kappa Alpha. My senior year they said, "All right, Minerva, you are in charge of elections." I had a beautiful, beautiful candidate to run for Miss TSU. She had about a 3.9 average out of a 4 point system, and she was a beautiful girl. I knew we were going to have some problems, because she was so pretty it was unbelievable and she was brilliant too. Then we had a very, very brilliant man we were running for President of the Student Council. Well, the other six or more fraternities and sororities bound together and formed this coalition to beat us. We had had it too long. We had monopolized it. They were determined that

they were going to take it and beat the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, which they did. There were some dirty politics played. We lost by about forty-five votes. We won the President of the Student Council, but we lost Miss TSU by about forty-five votes and we lost another position, which I think was the Vice President. But they used very dirty politics against my candidate for Miss TSU, so I made up my mind that if I ever get out of college, I am going to fight any dirty politics. That's where I really started, I guess.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: So is this what actually propelled you into the various political races that you have had?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: When I got out of college, Alma Ruth, I came back to Memphis. Russell Sugarmon was pretty dominant in the Shelby County Democratic Club, and he encouraged me to work in that Club.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Russell Sugarmon?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Russell Sugarmon, he is a Judge now. He encouraged me to work in this Club, and we worked for various candidates like Gore (Senior), and different people like John J. Hooker. I remember all of those different candidates we worked for. It is a Democrat Club. Then Russell himself ran for a position that was very unusual for a black; he ran for Public Service Commission. In the city then, we had the old City Commission form of government. So I really started liking politics. It was

exciting to me; it was challenging, and I just got all involved in it.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Did you ever teach?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: I taught, oh, I taught. [Laughter] When I got out of college, my first year, I got a job as a teacher.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Here in Memphis?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: My first contract was in Memphis. All my teaching days were in Memphis. I taught seventeen years in the school system. You won't believe this, but my first year's contract was $343.00 a month. I was so elated I didn't know what to do. I never thought I would have that much money of my own. When I got that contract, I was so happy! My Mother was happy. I told my Mother, I said: "I'm going to give you $100 a month, and I would have this $243 left." And it is amazing what I did with it.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: What year was that, Minerva?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: 1961, no, 1960. It was the 1960-61 teaching year. It was in the fall of 1960 when I started teaching. I bought a new bedroom suit; I bought a television for my room; I got my Mother an air conditioner for her den--all this stuff--beautiful clothes to teach in and all from $343.00 a month. [Laughter] And the first month I worked, we had a bonus. The teachers got a bonus. I don't think they have gotten one since then, but we got a bonus because of some tobacco and liquor tax. It was

an over payment, or something, and they gave it to the teachers. It was about $150 we got on top of our first check. I had never taught in my life, and I got it anyway. I gave that to my Mother so she could catch up on some of the money she had been spending to try to send me to school. It was just amazing. You know, you look at it now, and with $300 you couldn't even pay your utility bill with it, and have money left.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: What school was that, Minerva?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: My first school where I taught was Dunn Avenue. I taught at Dunn Avenue for five years. About the third year, I started going out to Memphis State to learn to be a librarian. I think the requirement to be a librarian then was that you had to have eighteen hours in Library Service over your B.S. degree. I went out there [Memphis State University] and was certified as a librarian.

In 1965 I got a contract to be a librarian, and I had to leave Dunn Avenue School. My principal loved me to death, and she didn't want me to leave, but we were just introducing libraries in every school in the public school system. They were not going to put one library in every school, so; therefore, I had to be at two different schools. My contract said that I had to be at A.B. Hill and at Kansas; therefore, I could not be at Dunn. We would go to one school on specific days, so that maybe on Monday I would be at A.B. Hill, and on Tuesday at Kansas. The largest school got the

three days; the smaller school got two. It worked like that until they fused librarians in all of the schools. We were pioneers, the librarians. Some schools had libraries before that. I think Colonial had one way before that, but the PTA had put monies together and made a library in the school and some of the teachers helped run it.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Then they did not have a regular librarian at that time?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Some teachers would go around and be the librarian. I think that was the way it worked.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: When did you go to Colonial to be the head Librarian?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: I came to Colonial in 1969, or the '69-70 school year. In the fall of 1969, I think. That was the year after Dr. King got killed. I stayed at Colonial until about 1979--'78 or '79--I am not quite sure, but I resigned. You know, I am not sure when I resigned, but I think it was 1978 or 1979.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: But you were already active in politics on the State level weren't you?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, I was active in politics as soon as I got out of college, but I guess the thing that really inspired me in politics, Alma Ruth--there has been so much which has happened in my life that it is amazing--but I guess I lived in an era when a lot of things happened to make you grow up. I taught school from 1960 to

about 1965--the third grade at Dunn Avenue--then I went into the Library program, and just about then I started getting involved in Civil Rights and heavily in politics. I was dabbling in it from 1960 to 1965.

As a matter of fact, I was not very concerned about it. To be honest, I had best friends and the people I ran around with were much wealthier than I. They came from very wealthy families. We were playing bridge, and we were infatuated with our little society and social groups. Pat Walker-Shaw, who used to be the President of Universal Life Insurance Company, and I were the same age. We had come out of school just about the same time; we had gone to Hamilton together. Lula McEwen, who is now the music director over at Overton--it is Hedgeman now--and I were very, very tight friends. We had decided that we were going to have a little society. We played bridge, had bridge parties, and we could care less what was happening in this world. We thought we had arrived. We were all teaching school; we had new cars, and we were pretty well attractive girls then. We had the world in our hands, so who cared what everybody else was doing. We could care less.

The thing that really got me back involved into what was going on in the city happened in 1967. I was driving home from school one day, and on the radio, I heard that the ministers had been maced downtown. Do you remember the Dr. King movement for the sanitation workers? Dr. King hadn't come here yet, but there was the sanitation strike.

The ministers had decided to march downtown, and the police maced them. They sprayed all of that mace gas everywhere. I had my radio on, and the news bulletin broke in and said that several black and white ministers were being maced on Main Street in front of Goldsmiths. They had turned around and gone back to Clayborn Temple Church, and the police had been hitting some. Mayor Loeb was saying that he wasn't going to listen to them. I said, "This is where I am supposed to be." So I just took my car and drove right down there to the Clayborn Temple Church. The ministers were all in there meeting--it was more like a rally than a meeting--and I sat down and got interested in it. This is where I wanted to be. So every night, after school, I was down there at the Clayborn Temple, which was the head, the focus point, at least, for the movement. And it led on up, of course, to bringing Dr. King here to Memphis and him being killed here.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: If I remember correctly, he was due to come and we had a giant snow storm, and it was postponed for about a week.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes. Well, let me tell you, Alma Ruth, I got really involved in that thing. I went every day. We would picket. I did things I thought I never would do, and every day we were trying to do something. I went on the tour. I was poor; I knew what poor was, but I never was poor like those people. I thought I was poor, but we were living pretty well compared to what other people

lived. They had a tour. Jesse Epps, I remember was here, and he was the leader of the Sanitation Workers Union.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Jesse Epps?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Little short guy who talked real loud and fast. He said that he was going to take some of the white East Memphis people and leaders and folk to see how these sanitation workers were living. Well, I wanted to go on that tour, and I went on it. I saw truly how some of those people were living, much more pitifully than I ever lived in my life. I knew that people lived like that, but ever so often you need to see it. I knew then that this is where I needed to be, to help these sanitation workers. I got involved. Every day I went down there; I assisted the leaders, and became very important in the movement. They put me on the board of the organization called "COME," "Citizens on the Move for Equality."

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Citizens on the Move for Equality?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, we called it "COME." That organization was a leadership organization for the sanitation workers to end the strike and to get them more money.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Were they asking for higher wages?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, and better working conditions. If you recall at that time, the sanitation workers were an integrated group--there were some white sanitation workers--but the black ones couldn't go into the sanitation barn where they ate lunch. They had to stay

outside in the rain. On rainy days, they would hide in the trucks and sit in there to eat to keep the rain off of them. What really started the strike was while one of the black guys was in a truck sitting down eating his lunch, someone accidently turned the motor on and it crushed him, and he died. Then when he died, I believe that his wife couldn't even bury him because they didn't have any kind of benefits. The city didn't give them any benefits. That was what started it all; that was what sparked it.

This had been going on for a while, so it just got to the point where everyone got angry and said that we have got to have better benefits; we have got to have better pay; we have got to have better working conditions. They won the community over. So, I soon got to be one of the ladies--one of the few women in the organization--that they expected to be there. And, I was always there.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Did you ever feel any limitations because you were a female in a male-dominated group?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Certainly. They expected us to do certain things, such as count the money. You know, every night the rally would have money, and they expected us to count the money or do the writing, or do the things that women usually do. We were just there; we were support. Well, it went on. Reverend James Lawson, whom I admire greatly--he is out in California now--was a United Methodist minister here. He had gone with Martin Luther King

to Gandhi and had helped write the non-violent procedures for the United States and the Civil Rights Movement. Jim Lawson decided that we ought to bring Martin Luther King to Memphis because he had been a student with him and under him as far as the Civil Rights Movement was concerned.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Under Martin Luther King?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: And Gandhi's teachings. Well, they went over there to learn the Gandhi tactics. I don't know if it was directly under Gandhi, but they learned the tactics over in India.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Did you say Jim Lawson?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: James Lawson, Reverend James Lawson. He is out in Los Angeles now at the Hollman United Methodist Church. So he said that we needed to bring Martin Luther King to Memphis. Now if you remember, and a lot of people don't know this, but Maxine Smith and Vasco, Jesse Turner, and the prominent officials of the NAACP didn't particularly like Martin Luther King.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: They didn't like Martin Luther King?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: There was a rivalry going on between the NAACP and the SCLC, which is the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that Dr. King founded, you know, down in Alabama. If you recall, Dr. King had gone in 1955 to Washington to the great march. They didn't want him to speak. Almost all of the leaders didn't want him to speak because he was a young, up-coming, dynamic person. They said if he speaks, he will 'take over this

movement.' And surely they couldn't stop him. The SCLC said, "We want him to be the speaker; he is the President of our organization." And he did just what they expected him to do. He made the speech, "I Have A Dream," and he took over the movement and became the focal point of the movement.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Was the difference in the two movements that he proposed non-violence?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: No. I think the NAACP and the SCLC were both predominantly non-violent movements and organizations. There were other organizations, like SNCC, that consisted of young people who were black power and who were more out spoken. There was Malcolm X, who was more radical. There were others, but NAACP and SCLC were rival organizations because they were both fighting for a higher place in the Civil Rights Movement, and each wanted to be the leader of the movement. It was not that the SCLC was such a great organization, but it was Dr. King who was such a dynamic personality, who could pull blacks and whites together, that could pull all kinds of people together.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: He had charisma.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: He had whatever it was. He was just a magnet, and people were drawn to him. The NAACP didn't have that in Roy Wilkins, their leader. Their leader was an older man, who was conservative, and not quite the kind of person that Dr. King was. He couldn't rally the people.

Well, first we brought Roy Wilkins into town. O.K.

There was a big crowd. Roy Wilkins didn't say anything. The people wanted to hear something, so Jim Lawson said, "Let's bring Martin Luther King." We brought Martin Luther King in. The "COME" Organization invited him, which I was a part of. I was not a very prominent part; I was a member. It was something for women to be considered members and on the Board. I wasn't just a member because I was on the Board of Directors. It wasn't every woman who could get on that Board, so it was an honor for me and because I was a young woman then.

Dr. King came, of course as you know, and that was what started the thing. At the first meeting, the Mason Temple was just flooded over with blacks and whites. It was unbelievable the amount of people both black and white. Nothing like that had ever happened in Memphis. He was just as dynamic as people thought he would be.

Often after that speech, he would come back in. We would sit around in meetings, sometimes at the Lorraine Motel, sometimes at other places in the city, and most times at churches. They went on, and went on. Loeb, of course, was never going to give in. The stalemate was there. It was one of the biggest struggles I have ever seen. Probably, Alma Ruth, to me the thing that really pulled the black community together--I don't think we will ever have that any more--what made that unity so forceful was that sanitation movement, and the real climax of that movement was Dr. King coming to Memphis.

So the movement was intact, then Dr. King gets killed. That particular night I was at school. We had an in-service meeting in the evening. It was about 6:00 o'clock, or somewhere between 6:00 and 6:30. A lady came to the door because she saw that I was in the school, and she knocked on the door. My principal didn't want anyone to let her in because he didn't want any interruptions. She kept knocking, so I went to the door. He didn't want me to go--crazy principal--but I went anyway because I could see the panic on the lady's face. She said: "Miss Johnican, the teachers need to know that they just killed Dr. King. You all need to get out of here and go home. It is not safe. They have asked everybody to go home and stay in the house."

ALMA BUCOVAZ: They started a curfew, didn't they?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: They had started a curfew. So, I raised by hand to the principal and he stood up. I said, "Look, Dr. King has been killed." I tried to do it tactfully, but the teachers just jumped up and started to get their things and leave. Nothing else needed to be said.

Instead of me going home, I drove my car down to the focal point, down to the Clayborn Temple where we had our meeting place. You could hear sirens all over the streets. You could see fires going, little small smoking fires, and fire trucks going. It was the most frightening experience I ever had in my life. I went straight to the church. I had to know for myself if he was really dead. I had just met him

a week before and had taken a picture with him, which I cherish right now. I just couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that this had happened in Memphis. After I got there, a minister there said, "Minerva, everyone should go home." They had a dispatcher radio and they were calling in down there at this focal point. Calls were coming in on the radio that people were beating and looting and these terrible things were happening. I went on home.

Of course, you know the story. A week after that there was the film, the TV, the nation-wide stuff, the mourning, and all of that. We went to the funeral down in Atlanta. We chartered some buses and went down to the funeral.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Oh, you attended Martin Luther King's funeral.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, it was an historical time in my life. Something happened to me then, Alma. I became more militant. I became a very militant person. When I say militant, I don't mean the kind that would throw a Molotov cocktail or get out and literally fight, but I became militant in my thinking that there was no solution to the problems, especially our racial problems and our poverty problems. I was just disillusioned, really. It was just a point in my life where I had to make a decision. I became so militant to the point that I think I was ineffective in what I thought and did because I couldn't contain myself. This went on for about a year.

As a matter of fact, during that time we had the school

boycott. Do you remember the Black Mondays, where they kept the kids out of school, and all of that? I went through that and worked in that with the NAACP. Right on the heel of that, and just as we were about to get things settled, there was a split between the NAACP and the other members of the school movement. Do you recall this?

ALMA BUCOVAZ: I vaguely remember that.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: The NAACP broke with the other members of the movement and there was a big split. So you found some kids going to school and some staying home, and all kinds of connotations on what should be done.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Did this cause a loss of effectiveness of the unified support?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: That really disillusioned me because it really was more political than it was commitment. So here I was: Dr. King had died; the black leaders here weren't showing me anything but division; I was really disillusioned. I just got out of the movement. For about a year, I did nothing. I didn't pay any attention to anything any of them was saying because I didn't believe them.

About 1970 or early 1971, I talked to some people more my age, and I said we ought to start something ourselves. So we got together and we started the Inner City Voter Education Committee. Just about that time, they were getting young people registered to vote. This was basically to get

eighteen year olds registered to vote. In most schools, kids in the senior year were eighteen, or going to be eighteen, so that was an opportune time for me to work with an organization that could really do something. We put together that organization, and we started really from the League of Women Voters.

The League of Women Voters was concerned about inner city people registering to vote. That was unusual for a predominantly white group of women to be concerned about black people voting, but they were. They were not going to do anything about it as far as coming into the community, but they certainly wanted to work with a black group that wanted to do something about it. They sort of helped me to start this Inner City Voter Education Committee.

They gave me the information they had; they supplied me with certain things. They didn't become a part of it, but they got us involved. They told me what would be a good way to go, and I did it. We registered quite a few. We had good contact with the high schools, the colleges, and we got a lot of young people registered to vote. We lobbied in Nashville to make sure that we ratified that law that eighteen year olds be given the right to vote. It worked. Our organization got a lot of publicity. We brought in a lot of young people. Now they call it rapping on the radio; our rapping was much different. We called our sessions "rap sessions," and we brought in young people and let them discuss. We showed them and told them about the political

issues, and tried to bring them into the main stream of politics.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: So you began to see that to bring about a change, you should use the power to vote. Is this correct?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, I saw that this was going to be the thing in the 70s, to get people registered to vote. You didn't have to pay for it. It was there. Many folk had died for that right to vote; many folk had pioneered for it. Martin Luther King was very instrumental in fighting for that right to vote. What better way to continue his beliefs than to get young people, especially black people, to vote.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: So, you took your militant feelings and turned them in a positive direction?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Something positive; something positive. I worked in that for at least four or five years, but during that time, I ran for political office--my first political office--in 1972.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: In 1972. Didn't you also work in the presidential candidacy for New York Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Alma Ruth, we decided something else to do. While I had the Inner City Voter Education Committee, which was a predominantly black organization working in the inner city to get people registered to vote, I also joined and helped form the

Volunteer Women's Round Table, which was a bi-racial group of Democratic women. I was the chairman of that. I was the second chairperson. The first chairperson we ran away. [Laughter] They wanted to make the group a 'tea and cookie group,' and we were a little more than that. We were the changing people; we were the flower children; we wanted to change things. We wanted the Democratic Party to open the doors for women--open them up for women--you guys have had it long enough; we wanted a part of it.

The women who were the 'tea and cookie group' had a meeting out in Hein Park, so we decided that we would take all of our people to that meeting. [Laughter] We went out there and we had numbers of folk. Do you remember the jeans you wore on your hip during that time with the belly buttons? I can't remember what you call those jeans. Hip Hugger Jeans, that was our symbol. We wore those Hip Hugger Jeans and the little midriffs. We were little skinny people looking good in our Hip Hugger Jeans. It was summer time, and we just took over. We changed it. We told them it was time to open this party up, and we couldn't do it by just drinking tea and cookies. We had to buckle down and get some positions in the [Democratic Party].

The Democratic Party was having a convention in 1972, and we decided what on earth are we going to go as. We have to have a focal point to pull our organization together. Here we are in Memphis, Tennessee--the Bible Belt--conservative, and the men's old political club had everything going. So we

decided we are going to run Shirley Chisholm. We were going to be Shirley Chisholm delegates. We built our total coalition around Shirley Chisholm delegates. We put together one of the most dynamic coalitions, that didn't get any further than Memphis, Tennessee, but it was dynamic here. [Laughter]

We went to Nashville, to Vanderbilt School there. The Democratic Party had put on a workshop for showing how to become delegates. We took about ten of our members of the Volunteer Women's Round Table--all the 'tea and cookie' women had left it--we were a little bit too fast for them. We took these ten women, who were prissy women, who were ready to open up the party, and we took them up to Nashville, and we learned the system down to a TEE.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: So you really learned the theatrics and the techniques of politics.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Ken Bode, who is a TV political analyst now, but then Ken Bode was a young man from one of the Eastern colleges who was hired by the political party to come down to Nashville to teach us. We learned that system to a TEE. At that time, they had the 'McGovern-Frazier' guidelines. The 'McGovern-Frazier' guidelines of the Democratic Party emphasized more women, more blacks, more young people, and less white men over thirty. [Laughter] Very radical!

ALMA BUCOVAZ: You fit right in at the right time.

Tape 1, Side 2.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Now, was this in 1972?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: In 1972. What happened was that we had to make sure that we were a part. Now there were coalitions and more coalition building. We had to work hard. We went out and got what we called the 'War Board.' We went down to Russell Sugarman's office--he was a prominent attorney--and he gave us a vacant room they had. We called people all over Memphis that we thought were young, that were black, that were women, and that were not males over thirty, and we built that coalition together. It was really an 'us-against-them' type of thing. We left out the unions because the union bosses had always controlled political parties. We left out the white men over thirty. We decided we were going to put this coalition together and actually take over the Democratic Party in Memphis. We built our coalition. We called every Ward and Precinct, and found people and put their names up there on those boards. We said, "Are you going to be a part of our coalition?" If they said yes, then we put their names up there on those boards.

We went over to Memphis State and we found all the 'anti-Vietnam' folk, because we knew that they had something to bark about, and we talked to them and told them how they could become part of the system. Work with us; we need delegates to the Convention. This is the local convention, the Memphis Democratic Convention. We need delegates. Work with us and we will make sure that we will have representation in Miami Beach, Florida at the Convention. Of course, we got them all involved.

Then, we went over to Lemoyne College and got the black students involved. Then, we went out and got black men involved and all of the young white men we could get involved. White women and black women, of course, made up our Club, so we were involved. We put that thing together. We got all of their names and their phone numbers and called them and told them where to be for the conventions in their areas.

During that time, they had three divisions: the Seventh Congressional District; the Eighth Congressional District; and the Ninth Congressional District. So we got key people to control those districts with our people so that we could go in there and take over and win the delegates. No more than nine delegates were coming from each district. We wanted to make sure that we would take control of those districts.

In the Ninth District, where I was being represented, I was chosen to be the key woman to run. Dr. H. Ralph Jackson was chosen to be the key man to run. Then we would mix it up with other people from the coalition. We went in, and the test was to run Dr. Jackson first to see how our coalition was working. It worked perfectly! All of our people were there; they stood up; everybody else gave up. All of the old pols that used to run the politics decided that they just couldn't fight these radical crazy folk. [Laughter] These 'flashes in the pan' they called us. We won everything.

We did real good in the Ninth District where I was

because we had more of our people in that District. In the Eighth, we won about three seats, and in the Seventh, they just killed us. We didn't win anything. We had to go up to Dyersburg and do it, and there was just another group of politicians up there that just took us over. But it ended up that we had more delegates than any body else, and they were Shirley Chisholm delegates.

Well, Wallace had won the Tennessee Democratic Primary. The law says that if you go to the convention, you were supposed to vote for George Wallace on the first ballot. That meant that even though our people ran as Shirley Chisholm delegates and won as Shirley Chisholm delegates, they were supposed to vote for Wallace on the first vote. But all of us said that we weren't going to do it. We would not vote for George Wallace. We went on to Miami Beach. They sent the sheriff's department after us with warrants because we were violating the law.

Of course, at Miami Beach there was a stalemate. We were known as the radical, crazy bunch from Memphis, and the whole thing was to cold-shoulder us. They couldn't do that, however, because we were good people. We were jolly and friendly.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: About how many did you say there were of you--about how many delegates?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: In our bunch?

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Yes.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: We won in Memphis, and we won some

in Jackson, but other than that, across the state we bombed out. The word had gotten out that we were not the people. We were untraditional; we were trying to change the way that politics go. By the time that we got to the State Convention, they had defeated everybody else. We couldn't win anything on the State level. We just had our group from Memphis and the group that went to Jackson from Memphis, but it was I guess about nine delegates in all that were firm Chisholm delegates, who were not going to change.

When we got to the Convention, it was really funny because people are just people. All of the ones there said they had to vote for Wallace. They didn't really like George Wallace, and they didn't want to vote for him, but they were just doing traditionally what people had done; that is, do what the party dictates. We weren't going to do what the party dictates. We were going to do what we felt we needed to do to bring about a change.

We had Tennessee buses and we had Tennessee hotels. The first night when we got on the bus, they just cold-shouldered us. The second night when we got on the bus, the Secretary of State was sitting at the front of the bus, and he said: "Minerva, you all go to the back with you-alls radicals." He was just teasing us, you know, and I said, "Look man, I've been sitting at the back of the bus all of my life; look, I'm going to sit up here in the front with the Secretary of State." We started singing. I said, "If you will sing our song for Shirley Chisholm, we will sing your song for

Wallace." We ended up that the Tennessee bunch was probably the most congenial bunch at the whole Convention because we were just good people who refused to let our differences overtake our personalities.

All in all, McGovern came out getting the nomination, which was disasterous for the Democratic Party. I found out several things from that. We had fun; we had been first in trying to crack the old stalemate in the Democratic Party to get women involved in it, and it was hard. We got criticized for it, and we made a lot of mistakes. We cut out the union, which was a very intricate part of the organization that brought in a lot of money and support. We cut that out. We cut out the old pols, which we very well couldn't do too much because we didn't have them. We found out that maybe it is not so very good to cut everybody out. Everybody needs a little piece of the action.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Is that when you first learned that principle of compromise that you referred to in one of your campaigns?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes. As long as you don't compromise your principles--the firm thing that you believe in--it is O.K. to compromise some policies and procedures. I learned that, and I said, "Well, we have got to go back and look at this thing now, and do it a little differently." We did. But I still think it was necessary, and 1972 was the year for that to happen. Miami Beach was the Convention where change was supposed to take place.

Do you know, time repeats itself? It happened in the 60s, and it was time now in the 70s. Because of that, more women are involved. Because we stood up for Shirley Chisholm, another woman has run for a position on a high level, and there will be other women, but this was a beginning.

There is an old motto I have, Alma Ruth: "Man is not measured by where he stands at times of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." So we stood there at a time of challenge and controversy and we hollered for some change. We didn't do it all right; we made a few mistakes, but we did it. No one else was willing to do it, so we did it. We caught a little flack for doing it. It was a beginning in Memphis. Other people were doing it in other cities, but we were doing it in Memphis. We were gradually making changes so women could get involved. We won some and we lost a lot.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Is this where you first decided you were going to run for office? Was it in 1975 that you first ran?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: No, 1972. I ran for office in 1972 for State Representative. As a matter of fact, after I came back from the Miami Beach, Florida Convention, I had already decided to run. I lost by only about two hundred votes for a State Representative seat. And all of the Volunteer Women's Round Table came over there in my neighborhood--the black and the white alike--knocking on

doors in a totally black district. I don't know if it was the best thing to do or not, but they did it. I lost that seat by maybe a couple hundred votes. Then I ran again in 1974 for State Representative.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Who was your opponent?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Alvin King. He is still in there in the House right now, Alvin King. I ran again in 1974 for that same seat and lost by just a little bit more, between three and four hundred votes. Then in 1975, people drafted me to run for what was at that time the County Court, which is now the Shelby County Commission. I ran for that seat, and won it by only forty-three votes.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Was Hill the political candidate who was opposing you?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: No, that was in the City Council race. I ran for County Commissioner in 1975. I won by forty-three votes. Five other opponents were in that race, and I won by forty-three votes. Of course, in the County races, you do not have a runoff, so I was declared the winner.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Did you have both black and white support?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: In the County Commission race?

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Yes.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: I think the district was probably predominantly black. There may have been some white. There was one white candidate in the race,

so there must have been some white vote, but I don't recall that much white support. I wasn't that well known then.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Why do you think they drafted you to run in that? Was it because you were known in the community for your fight?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Well, I had worked hard in the community. I had run against Alvin King, and he had beaten me, and they felt that I should have something. People really felt that I worked hard and I was a fighter. They liked that part--"She never stops; she is consistent in what she wants to do." I think people just wanted me to win.

I became the first lady to serve on the County Commission, which was then the County Court. As a matter of fact, Alma Ruth, there is an old saying down there at the County Commission that it was never intended for women to be there. They only had one restroom, and it was for men, and it never had a lock on the door. So when I got there, I had to take a buddy to the door with me to stand when I went to the restroom. I made a point of it, and I said, "You guys must have built this thing just because you thought women would never be on the County Court--I want a women's restroom." They had a latrine in there too. [Laughter] I wanted a women's restroom, and I did win a women's restroom.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: You also won a few other things, or you certainly worked to improve race relations, crime prevention, utility service. What were some of the other battles that you experienced?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: The County Commission was a position that was not like the City Council. You don't hear as much about it as you do the [City Council.] But I had some people to approach me from a little area called Boxtown. They were not getting representation. The Representatives were not helping them; the city was not helping them; the county was not helping them, and they felt that they were some people who had been annexed into the city and never given any services. The people who approached me were Family Service Counselors. They said: "Minerva, we have talked to everybody, and we see that you are compassionate. Will you come out here and look at these people, just go on the trip with us?"

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Was Boxtown just part of the County then?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: No, it had been annexed. The city had annexed it, but they had never done anything for them. So they said, "Minerva, you are not going to believe this." They drove me out there. I had never seen Boxtown in my life. I had heard about it, but never had seen it. So they took me out there to Boxtown, and I saw these little roads, poor roads with little gravel on them, no curbs and no gutters.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Did they have utilities?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: No water, no restrooms. I could not believe it in the City of Memphis. I could not believe that this existed. The people were just so charming to me. They were good people--good, honest, hard-

working folk. About two-thirds of the people out there were elderly people, and the other third were younger to middle-age people who worked hard. They weren't welfare people. They weren't people who were trying to get over on the government. They were hard working people, who just happened to work for a low salary or had a fixed income. You just fell in love with them. They were just genuine people, sort of country people. I said, "I just can't believe this." I fell in love with that community. I said that we have got to do something to make a change, to make people hear us. If we don't do anything but scream and make them hear us; talk and talk; complain and complain until they do something about it.

The only thing I ever knew about politics was coalition building. I had learned it in college; I had learned it in the women's movement; and now, I was going to apply that to my political office. Here I was way over across town in an area I didn't represent in my district, over there meddling in another politician's district that they hadn't done anything about. The Fords especially got very angry about this.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Is this the beginning of your rift with the Ford family?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Well, the Ford battle really started when I ran for the State Representative seat. They worked with Alvin King against me and targeted me as a threat to their organization. You know, it went on and

on. I ignored it because I was going to do what I was going to do anyway. When I got into the Boxtown thing, that was a little bit like coming into their territory and embarrassing them. But I didn't look at it that way. I looked at it as some people out there who needed to be heard, and no body was listening.

So I formed a coalition. I wrote all of the social agencies that I knew of. I wrote The Commercial Appeal, and at that time we also had The Press-Scimitar. I wrote all the elected officials who represented that area, and I called a mass meeting at the church down there. I met with the minister, Reverend Tommy McRay. I said, "We are going to bring about some change in this city." Reverend McRay was very happy to see me. He was a young minister who had just come into that area. He had a church there called Boxtown Missionary Baptist Church, and he wanted to do this. It was good for him. He was a young man inspired to build a church and to build a following. So we just pulled together and had a series of mass meetings. We brought in the TV. It was really a publicity gimmick to put emphasis on Boxtown, and we were successful.

We started getting editorials all the time about it. Newspaper reports started coming out, and reporters were taking pictures of folk carrying buckets of water on their heads. We had the Mayors out. Wyeth Chandler sent Gwen Awsumb, who was Director of Community Development. Things started to happen.

A lot of politicians thought Minerva Johnican was meddling, but it didn't make any difference to me. We were making some change. I don't take credit today for what happened in Boxtown, but I do take credit for being the 'catalyst' for the change. We formed an organization and told those people that the only way they could determine their destiny, was for them to organize and be in numbers. And when these people come out here, you have your numbers and you let them know that you want something for the taxes you pay. You may not pay much, but you pay proportionate to what you have, and you deserve to have services out here.

The garbage pick up was infrequent. Even the postal service was not good. I had to call the postal service and ask them how come we have these rural boxes that were on the corners instead of in front of these people's homes. They had rural boxes in clusters, and these elderly folk couldn't get to these boxes and get their social security checks. I had never seen them like this. They were just locked up in the corner, so they would go and take numbers. I said, "We have to do better than this." So we did make a change. The Post Master was very gracious. He said that nobody had ever asked him anything; no body ever complained. It was just little things that we made happen in that area, Alma Ruth, and often by just picking up the phone and calling.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: I believe it was County Mayor Roy Nixon who said that you never forgot the people that you were representing. He said that you were the

voice of reason for the County Court. That is the way he expressed it.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: We got along real well when I was there on the County Court. Of course, he stayed on it two years. That was when the new government came in. In the next election, Bill Morris came in. I went to Bill Morris about Boxtown. Bill Morris is similar in his understanding of publicity. He likes to put things in the limelight and make them happen. He was good at that.

Bill Morris read about Boxtown, and he said, "Minerva, I want to do something to help in Boxtown." It was a good political move for him. He knew that this was a focus point, and that I was out there trying to spearhead and pull the people together. He knew that if he came out there, it couldn't be anything but a plus for him. So Bill Morris said: "I'm going to pick a Saturday and I want you to be out there. I am going to go out there and we are going to do everything we can. We are going to put all our public works out there to clean the streets, and just do everything we can, then we are going to go in and do some other things." We cleaned up the area one Saturday, all day long, everybody volunteered.

Because it was spearheaded and because Bill Morris was doing it, Wyeth Chandler got jealous, and said they are out there making me look bad. These people are annexed into the city, yet the county and the county commissioners are still out there working on it. As a result, Gwen Awsumb comes in

and says, "I found some money and we can probably give every one of these people some water lines to their homes and some sewage lines to their homes."

This was a big victory. Of course, they didn't say Minerva Johnican did this, or the people in Boxtown made this happen, but we know we did. We know because we were the catalyst to keep it in the limelight. We drew church people in; social agencies came in; all kinds of people came into Boxtown and worked with us to make this happen. The Press-Scimitar and The Commercial Appeal said they were going to keep it in the limelight until the government officials did something about it.

So now if you go out to Boxtown, it is a different area. They have gutters; they have curbs; they have streets. I would say that everybody out there has running water to their homes. They have sewage lines. It is a different area. It has a lot more to be done, but if you went out there when I first started out there in 1979, or if you saw pictures of it then, you wouldn't believe it. It is a whole different kind of place now.

I have told all of this, Alma Ruth, to say that when you are in politics, in the public position, sometimes you can not make all of these things happen, but you can take stands. By taking those stands and by drilling on the principles and values that people should have in those stands that you take and in these particular issues, then you can bring the kind of publicity to it that will make people want to bring about

a change. And that is what politics is all about--encouraging change--that is what it is all about.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: You truly learned your lesson of how to make the system work.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: I like issues. I like big issues, and especially people issues. We got Boxtown moving, and now everybody wants to go out there and grab onto Boxtown. Everybody wants to be a part of it. Congressman Ford brought the Secretary of HUD, and took him on a tour all through Boxtown. This was really supposed to upscale what I was doing. Congressman Ford brought him out there; they toured the area, and my limelight was null and void when the Congressman came through. I was never invited to those meetings although we had been working there for about seven or eight months. I was never invited to any of the meetings, and never made a part of anything that was happening. It was all to let them know that what Minerva Johnican is doing isn't worth two cents. This is what the Congressman did.

He proposed to those people that he was going to build this huge high-rise senior citizens building out there, which never happened. As a matter of fact, he came out there and did that one splash publicity stunt, left, and never came back. And left those folk those broken dreams.

I told them the first meeting that I had with them; I said, "I am not going to stand here and tell you that we are going to build some big glamorous buildings. I am not going

to sit here and tell you that we are going to make some big glamorous neighborhood out here. I don't have the power to do that, but I do have the power to help pull the necessary people together, and the government officials together, to bring about a change that you can make happen and that will decide the destiny of this community, and it will be much better than you have now. This is all you can promise people. You can't give them a whole lot of glamorous promises.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Especially ones you can't fulfill.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: They had been doing that all of the time. You see, every politician that ever came to that area promised them the world, and nothing happened.

We came in there and promised nothing but to bring them together, to show them how to use their own power in numbers. They got gutters; they got streets; they got water; they got sewers; and those that couldn't buy their bathroom utilities--their tubs and their sinks and commodes--we had grants. We found grants through Community Development. Ms. Gwen Awsumb got interested in that area, and she found grants that would put a tub in a senior citizen's house.

We had one lady, Mrs. Mixon, who had never had a bath in a bathtub, never in her life. We went down there and personally--the county government, Mayor Morris and all of us--went down there on a Saturday when we were cleaning up, and the highlight of that visit was to put Mrs. Mixon's

bathroom in. Plumbers donated their time and put her bathroom in. Mrs. Mixon just stood there and grinned. She had never had a bathroom in all her life, and here she was so happy. She had water running, and she just turned it off and on; she was just so happy. She said, "God bless you all; God bless you all." She loved it! That in itself was worth holding that office because we made that happen.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Did you have the support of the other county commissioners [for Boxtown]?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: None of them would come out. Politics creates jealousy. None of them would come out. My name was mentioned too much in Boxtown. Many times no politicians came out, except Mayor Morris. Mayor Morris was the only politician who took advantage of that movement and worked in it. He was smart. He was a smart man because he knew that this is where the people were, and this is where the focus of Memphis was.

I like to choose issues that cut through color lines, and this was an issue that cut through color lines. I had as many white folk calling me concerned about Boxtown as there were black. That was important. We need especially to focus on issues that are not race laden, issues that cut through the line. You know, in Memphis we have so many issues that blacks and whites can support together, and if we would just focus on those issues, then all of these issues that break us apart and that are race laden would be miniscule. We need to focus on these issues that we can work together.

Crime is such an issue. None of us want crime. I don't think there is a black person in any community that wants the dope folks standing on their corners, or wants the folk breaking the bottles, or want the folks doing this. I don't think there is a white person that wants that to happen. Those issues we can work with together. I think the average family wants their children to have good schools. They want to be able to buy a home. They want to be able to live in their community comfortably and safely. They want good streets. They want good roads. There are a lot of issues we can work together on. We did this when I got on the City Council through the Building Bridges Program. Our whole motto was to build bridges on issues that we can all work together on, positive issues.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Instead of working separately?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes. There are always going to be some issues where race will be involved, but there are so many issues that we can work together on. If you work on those issues, you can't ignore if something is happening over here that is racial, but when you are really initiating some good projects to work on, you can find those where we can work together. There are so many we can work together on because people are people. They want the same things. They want the chance to work, homes, good schools; they want these things, and most people who live in different neighborhoods want that. We took that, the neighborhood, and used the neighborhood as a focus. I'll get to 'Building Bridges' in a minute, but back to Boxtown.

So, no, the politicians did not support us that much. But some of the government officials did, especially Mayor Morris. His administration supported us whole heartedly. Gwen Awsumb, who was Director of Community Development didn't do that much support at first, but as Gwen went out there and met those people, then Gwen Awsumb became a part of making things happen. As a matter of fact, she was the key to it, because she was the City Community Development person, and if she hadn't decided to come into that area and make some things happen, we could have hollered and protested all we wanted to. She was the one who had the money--the community, the federal money--so she ignited the first movement, and it happened.

But I still say when I go out to Boxtown today, I tell the people (they always love me out there, when I go out there, they say you made these things happen) I didn't make them happen. I simply used my influence as an elected official to pull the necessary people and components together to help you all realize how much power you really have to make it happen. You made it happen because you all came together. It makes them feel good because you are not selfish. You are letting them know that by them coming together--the people in that area--they made it happen. They said that they only came together because they saw somebody who one time told them the truth. Somebody who didn't come in here with a whole lot of big stories about how many pretty streets we were going to have, how many beautiful homes we

were going to build out here, and all, because that didn't happen. But we did get the main things that they wanted: the water, sewage, utilities, streets, curbs, gutters, cleaning up their neighborhood, good garbage pickups, and getting the postal service to put their mailboxes in. That doesn't sound like much to you and me, but to those people, that was a whole other kind of thing happening for them. So that was what was important.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: And for the first time, they truly had representation from the official structure of the city.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, and right now they meet. At their Boxtown meetings, they have fifty or sixty people come. They are strong. I just read last week that Tom McRay--the minister who started with me--just built a million dollar church out there with all kinds of programs such as anti-drug programs, Boy Scout and Girl Scout programs, and all of that right there in that area. That is important; that is very important. I dare say that it happened because some of us got together, and Tom McRay happened to be one of them, and saw what was needed in the area.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Let's see now, how many terms did you serve on the County Commission? Were you re-elected?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: I served on the County Commission two more years. The first term I served,

there was an unexpired term for a man who had gone to the Governor's administration, so I went in first on a three-year term. Then I came back for re-election and served a four-year term. So I served about seven and one-half years there. Then, of course, the Congressman decided that Minerva Johnican was just about too much. Before then, I ran for Congress in 1980. I decided I would run for Congress. I am the kind of person who will take a dare you know. [Laughter]

It wasn't a very attractive election. As a matter of fact, I didn't do that well. My campaign was considered the 'Iron Curtain.' Anyone who came on to my campaign was doomed by the Ford machine. And nobody came. [Laughter] I am telling you that they were afraid. Unless it was friends, very close friends, or family, nobody would come. So that campaign bombed out. It wasn't that much, but again, we did what we felt needed to be done. Harold Ford needed to be challenged, and we challenged him. I don't know if it made him any different, but it did bring out what I thought all along was the real Harold Ford.

I see everything that you do as positive; therefore, my campaign brought out the real Harold Ford. Harold Ford said, "In the next two years Minerva will be coming up for re-election for County Commissioner, and I intend to go out there and spend every penny I can to beat her." Surely, that is what he did. He got one of his friends to run against me. He spent all the money and dared any politician to support me.

This is very important, Alma Ruth, because I never told this story before. I had the endorsement of just about every political organization in this city--black and white; democrat and republican--and I had the endorsement of all the ministers just about in this city. Harold Ford had Jake Butcher money, and Randy Tyree was running for Governor, and he had the Ford ballot. The Ford ballot was very strong, and he decided that this is where he was going to pay Minerva back for her daring to come into Boxtown and embarrassing him, for number one, and for running against him in 1980. I had jumped on just about as far as I could go, and he sent messages to me that the city just wasn't big enough for Harold Ford and Minerva Johnican.

He sent word to me that he was going to whip me and show me just where I am supposed to be. Well, he forgot one thing. He forgot that I am a woman, and considered a lady, because I have always carried myself above board; he forgot that. We didn't have much money. Women can't raise much money for campaigns. People just don't give us much money. They give a man that does ten times less work that you, who is less effective than you, one thousand dollars for his campaign, and they may give you one hundred dollars. Some how they imagine that women can make it on the one hundred dollars, which we always had to do. Harold Ford got most of the money. That was some of the money that worked against Minerva Johnican.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Was that the Butcher money?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: The Butcher money. I know that. The

Randy Tyree-running-for-Governor money. That particular year Harold Ford did everything possible. He put out about three different sheets on me that were all lies. He ran this guy that nobody ever heard of before.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Who was this?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Julian Bolton. He ran him. No one ever heard of him. He had never been committed to any kind of anything, but [Harold Ford] didn't want Minerva Johnican in politics for Minerva Johnican would dare to run against him, and may have very well done it again, so the best thing to do was get her out. But every black politician in this city--minus the Shelby County Democratic Club which was controlled then by Russell Sugarman--worked against me. They didn't work against me directly, but they were afraid, and they took orders from Harold Ford not to be on a ticket with Minerva Johnican. Anybody who was on a ticket with Minerva Johnican, or anybody who passed out a ballot with Minerva Johnican's name on it who was running for office, Harold Ford was going to work against them too. The sad part of it, Alma Ruth, was that they were afraid. That was so hurtful.

I will never forget what happened to Walter Bailey, who is now County Commissioner. I was told by one of my friends that Harold Ford literally cursed him out at a meeting because the Shelby County Democratic Club had endorsed me. They had ballots they were putting out with their candidates on them; Walter was one of their candidates, and I was too.

Harold Ford told Walter as well as George Brown, who is Judge now, that if he ever heard of them putting out that ballot, then he would see to it that they wouldn't win either. The part that hurt me the most was that he frightened them. They were afraid.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Why weren't you afraid of the Ford machine?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Because I knew that I was right in what I was doing. I had worked for the people, and I had to run my campaign. I had to stand up for what I believed in. I was going to do what I wanted to do. The Boxtown people needed me. Harold Ford wasn't going to tell me whether I could come into that area or not. If he wasn't doing it, then I was going to be there, and it didn't make any difference to me. I just had to take what punches were out there. And if he had enough money to defeat me, then that was something I had to live with, but I wasn't going to be told by him, or dictated to by him, in politics what I could or could not do, or what my parameters were in politics. So we ran the campaign.

That particular year, I was also running for re-election to the State Democratic Executive Committee because I had been on that Committee for about four or five years. My name was on the ballot twice. I could have sued for that, but after the campaign was over, I said I will just let it go. I won my State Executive Committee seat about two to one to anybody who was running. My vote was just that high. Jesse

Turner, who is dead now, analyzed that campaign, and he said, "Minerva lost the campaign [for County Commissioner] basically because she was on the ballot twice."

ALMA BUCOVAZ: And this confused the voters?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: It was a long ballot. My name appeared on the ballot in the prominent position for the Democratic Executive Committee position, which it shouldn't have been. The minority position for the Democratic Executive Committee was first on the ballot, right up under Harold Ford's name. The people pulled my name there, and when they got down way over there on the ballot where their vote would be for the County Commissioner position, they felt they had voted for me once before, so what did they do, but take the prominent ballot for Harold Ford's candidate. Well, some of them were still pulling for me, but it confused them just enough so that I lost by about 377 votes. It was just enough with all of his powerful machine and five or six people at the polls hollering, "Bolton, Bolton, Bolton." You see, he pushed that name in their face along with his. Wherever he put his sign up, he put 'Bolton and Ford,' 'Bolton and Ford.' He was determined to beat me.

They won that race. Harold Ford read that win wrong, however. It was a mistake; it was a fluke. He read it wrong. He read it that this was the killing point for Minerva Johnican. He got on TV and hollered, "Minerva Johnican is dead; the people have shown they don't want her

any more," and just all kinds of vicious things. I sat back. I was hurt, no telling, because if I got beat, I didn't want to get beaten by Harold Ford because I knew that would just make him that much worse in the community.

But what it did was many of the people didn't realize what had happened. The next morning when they woke up and found out that I had lost my election after all the work I had done on the County Commission, people started realizing just what kind of person Harold was. I believe that began the downfall of Harold Ford. I really believe that. Because then you could just see the things start happening, and they were not good things happening to him. As a matter of fact, I think 1982 was the beginning of his downfall. He had gotten just too powerful, and too popular, and too dictatorial.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: And this was in 1982?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, 1982. So in the summer of 1983, a year passed, and people had been calling me and saying, "Minerva, we have to have you back in office; we have to have you back in office." I didn't know whether I wanted to go back or not, but I knew I had to, though. I had to prove that the people didn't reject me. It was just something that I had to do.

I thought what will I do, what can I run for? The City elections were next year, so I decided that I would probably go on and run for a City Council seat, but I decided I would run for an at-large seat.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Wasn't this unheard of at that time?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Unheard of. No black had ever won an at-large seat. I knew I could win it, but I knew I had to have the support of the white community. You have to look and target your white support. So I went out to Boxtown. They were having a festival that year. It was ironic that I decided to go to Boxtown, but I went out to Boxtown and everybody was hugging and kissing me and saying they were glad to see me.

As I walked [through the Boxtown festival], I met David Hill. He gave me a handbill that he was passing out, and it said District Six. At the bottom of it, it had down there: "Paid for by David Hill Campaign, Frank Banks Treasurer." Anybody who knows anything about politics, knows that Frank Banks is Harold Ford's treasurer. So David Hill had to be Harold Ford's candidate.

I called Kay Black, who was a very good friend of mine, and who was a writer then at the Press-Scimitar. I asked Kay what do you know about David Hill. She said, "Oh, that is the candidate that Bill Farris and Harold Ford and all of them decided is going to take over Jeff Sanford's seat." I said, "Ha, this is real interesting."

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Had David Hill ever run for any office? Wasn't he in the plumbing business?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, he was in the plumbing business, but his father was a good friend of Bill Farris, who was a [powerful] Democrat. Well, that infuriated

me, because I said now here Jeff Stanford is not running again--he was a Democrat--and this seat should be filled by another Democrat. This is the real time for the Democratic Party to help a black get elected at-large. Kay said they would never do it. They have already decided that David Hill is going to be the person. But I said, "We need a black at-large on the City Council to show that we can break through this thing."

She said, "Minerva, I don't see but one thing for you to do." So Kay and I decided on the phone that I should run for that seat. She said: "That is the seat that Harold Ford, Bill Farris, and all of them are going to be pushing David Hill in. If you get in that position, Harold Ford can't fight against you. He has already hurt himself too bad, and if he fights you a second time, then he is doomed. The city will not accept him any more." I said, "I don't want to get in there and loose though, and I can't loose against him twice." She said, "Oh, you know, we have to get in there and do our homework."

I decided to call Karen Williams. Karen Williams was a State Representative, who happened to be a Republican, that I had helped the year before. [My relationship with Karen Williams came about this way.] Previously I had helped John Spence, who was a friend of Harold Ford, to get elected to a State Representative seat. Then, [when I ran in the County Commission race in 1982] John Spence decided that he was going to help Julian Bolton against me in the white district

in mid-town, which he represented, because Harold had told him to. Harold said, "In exchange for me helping you, John, you better support Bolton." John Spence succumbed to the dictator's wishes against a friend who had walked the Orange Mound district with him earlier when he got elected. Back in the County Commission race, I decided that I would call Karen Williams to help me get some whites to work at the polls and help me get some white votes because [John Spence] was sending a letter to everyone in white mid-town, by the dictates of Harold Ford, to vote against me. The whites didn't know me that well then, I hadn't really gotten into the white politics. I told Karen I need help.

Karen said, "Minerva, it is a last-minute thing, but I am going to get some people together and we are going to work those white polls for you and try to get some of those votes back for you." I said, "If you do it, Karen, I am forever obligated; my word is as good as gold." So when her time came up at the General Election (which is right after the Primary) when she ran, I went over there and worked and we beat John Spence. That was my first victory against Harold because Harold was supporting John Spence [who ran against Karen Williams]. Harold Ford had promised John Spence he would get re-elected if he worked against me. Karen had helped me, so I crossed party lines and helped her.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: So you helped a Republican, white woman, and she won?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: She won; she won. No one expected

her to win, but our coalition made it happen. Some of the Democrats got angry, but my thing was she was a sister, and sisterhood goes beyond partyhood sometimes. We made it happen. So she won, and then Karen was obligated to me. She said, "Whenever you need me, Minerva, we will be there for you." Therefore, in 1983 when I met David Hill at Boxtown and saw what was going on, and after Kay Black and I discussed it over the phone, I called Karen Williams.

Kay [Black] was a Press-Scimitar reporter, and she said, "Minerva, what I want you to do as soon as you decide you are going to run, give me the scoop, and I will put it in the paper Monday morning."

Tape 2; Side 1.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: So Karen Williams had told me that she would help me whenever I needed her. I had no idea [at that time] that I would be running the next year, but now I knew that I had to. I either had to run or call myself politically dead because I couldn't let my history be that Harold Ford defeated me. That couldn't be the end of my history of my political life. There was only one thing I could do.

I said: "Kay, I am very popular with the blacks--much more popular now than I have ever been because of what Harold did--a lot of them are angry and will probably never support Harold again because of the way he ran that campaign against

me. I've got the sympathy vote. I've got a lot of people out there that feel that a woman was done wrong. I have got to use this to my advantage. The only thing I can do is to run in an at-large race, and I've got to win it. And the only way I can win this race is to get some white votes, and a substantial amount of white votes. I've got to get enough. I've got to get thirty to forty per cent of the white vote."

Kay said, "Oh, Minerva, we will never get that." I said, "We've got to get it, and I don't know but one thing to do, and that is to call the Republican Party and asked them if they will support me in this at-large position." Kay said, "That is the only way you are going to do it, Minerva, call the Republican Party and see if you can get genuine support."

Maida Pearson was the chairperson then of the Shelby County Republican Party.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Who is that?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Maida Pearson, who happened to be a woman. So I called Maida, and I said, "Maida, I need your help." She said, "You know, Minerva, I will do anything I can." I said, "Look, I am looking at position six, which is the at-large position, the one Jeff Sanford had." (Democrats traditionally had held it.) I said: "I don't know if Republicans are running anyone for that seat, but I think I have excellent choice and opportunity to win that seat if I can be assured that you can stir the Republican Party up to vote for me. We will do a lot of things for the city. First, we will prove that blacks

can work with Republicans, and pull together a black-white coalition that has never in its life put a black at-large in office. And, you would have a friend--a Democratic friend--for the rest of your life. I will help you; I will be there whenever you need me."

[Maida] said, "Minerva, I think they have been talking about running somebody for that seat." I said: "Let me tell you what is going on. I have looked at this thing. Kay Black and I have looked at it. David Hill is Bill Farris' pick, and Bill Farris is the honshu of the Democratic Party. Bill Farris has already lobbied with James Smith from the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees Union for Harold Ford. No black is supposed to get in this spot unless they have consent from him. Now, they have decided that this is David Hill's position, and that is it. No Democrat is supposed to run. But you know that I am not an orthodox Democrat, and I am going to do what I want to do." [Laughter]

Maida said, "Minerva, it sounds interesting." I said: "You will get an opportunity to show that the Republican Party will support blacks. You get an opportunity to show that we keep our word--I helped Karen and you all helped me--and we get an opportunity to start a working relationship that could change a lot of things in Memphis for the better." She said: "Minerva, the more you talk, the more I like it. Let me get on the phone and call around to some of our Ward Precinct folk. I'm not going to call the hierarchy of the

Party, because you know the old men run that, and they have their little old way. They have probably already decided on what they are going to do, but the real support comes from the grass-root folk on the Ward Precinct level. Let me call some of my people and see what kind of feeling I get about you in that position."

Maida did a fantastic job. I told her that she had to call me back before midnight because I was going to call Kay Black first thing in the morning and give her a story for the Press-Scimitar. She called me about ten minutes to midnight, and said: "Minerva, we are going to do it! We are going with you. Let me tell you what I am going to do. Not only are we going to support you, but we are going to announce that we are supporting you. We are going to give you financial support. We are going to write letters and target our Republican Primary voters that you are the best choice of the two Democrats in the race. We are going to have signs in white neighborhoods, and you will be the first one ever to have them in the history of Memphis. We intend to put your signs in our yards. We are going to do all of that for you. It is going to be real; it is going to be real support."

I said, "O.K., Maida." She said, "All I want you to do is just be a real good candidate and go out there and win it." That was all I needed.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: That should have been enough incentive right there for you.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: When I announced that I was running for

this position, everybody thought that Minerva Johnican was the epitome of being a fool. Here she had been beaten by Harold Ford. Here she had taunted Harold again by helping Karen Williams, and helped the Republican Party. Not only would Minerva not get any black Democratic votes, but a lot of blacks wouldn't vote for her because she had taunted the Party. [Laughter] They didn't know what was going on, and you would be surprised at the criticism I got even from blacks.

You see traditionally, people don't take a chance and take stands. It is comfortable to do what other people do, and it is very uncomfortable to challenge something that you feel is wrong. People don't like to be in company with you because they are afraid that someone may target them too. They felt that Harold had beaten me and took my high profile position from me. I wasn't going to have any trouble going against Harold again because I wasn't going <u>against</u> Harold Ford. I was going <u>for</u> a seat. So we ran the race. We didn't have much money. David Hill had all the TV time. He was on the TV two and three times a day.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: He was a business man, a very well known business man.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Very well known business man with a very lucrative fund-raiser account.

Everything was going his way. The top Democratic Party focal machine was angry with me. I just wasn't supposed to win, but they forgot one thing. To the regular little person out

there in Memphis, Minerva Johnican's name was a household word. The regular people in the neighborhoods were out there buzzing the buzz word saying that we are going to put that girl in. You would be surprised at the white calls I got from people. Little hard working folk. I used to go over in Frayser, of all places, and see men going into the hamburger places. I would walk into the hamburger places, and they would raise their hand [demonstrated victory sign]. "Go get them, Minerva, go get them."

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Were they giving you the winning sign?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, and these were people you never would have thought would even speak to a black. It was almost, Alma Ruth, like I wasn't even a "person of color." Color wasn't involved. It was just like I was transparent. They didn't even see color. It was almost like Oprah Winfrey. You don't see color; you just see a person. And this is where you think you have really reached a point where that is important that people see you just as a person, and don't stop to say she is black or she is white, but see you. That's how it was everywhere I went. I don't care where I would go. It was those grass-root folk--the man driving that sanitation truck--saying, "Minerva, we are for you; we are going to make you Mayor or anything." You know, it was all over like that. It was just that I knew I was going to win.

The day of the election we had worked so hard. We had no TV time. David Hill had it all. Harold Ford was doing all

of his tactics under cover. He couldn't come out too publicly against me because the people were, in just so many words, letting him know that 'no more of that.' But they were doing this stuff through other folk. David Hill couldn't get any signs in the black community, but I could. I got signs in the black and white community. The day of the election, it was looking bad. I got a call from Gerald Gaia, who was a Republican member on the Shelby County Election Commission.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Did you say Gerald Gaia?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Gerald Gaia. Gerald called and he said: "Minerva, I want to talk to you. We've fought a hard fight, but I want to talk to you. Minerva, I don't think we are going to be able to win this thing. The black turn-out is so terribly low. What is happening up here at the Election Commission, what we are seeing, is about a seventeen or eighteen per-cent turn-out, and about a thirty-two per-cent white turn-out. This is very low, period! But the black turn-out is twice as low as the white turn-out. If that trend continues that way, I just don't see how you can win. I wanted to call you so you won't be upset. We love you. You know, if we loose it, we lost it."

That really hurt me. Just the whole thing went over me. Because I knew that Gerald was there at the Election Commission seeing the trend.

Then Gerald said one other thing. He said: "Of course, Minerva, it is not impossible. You would have to get forty

per-cent of most of those white votes to win this thing." I said, "Gerald, that will never happen; of course, it is not impossible; miracles do happen." I just felt like I had lost. So we drove out into the black community, and we saw people just straggling in--just one, two, three--very pitiful.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Was there any reason for the poor turn-out? Was it weather?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: No, it was just the turn-out.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Was it Ford telling them not to vote, or any particular reason why they didn't vote in large numbers?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: No. I am trying to think what it was. It was a City election. Ford wasn't on it that year. There was no real big name running. Hackett was running for Mayor. Oh! I know what it was. Hackett had been appointed the year before for Mayor and in this election, there were three or four blacks running against him. Do you remember that?

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Yes.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: There were too many blacks running against him--three black popular folks--Otis Higgs, John Ford, and D'Army Bailey were running against Hackett. In other words, it was just one of those things where blacks weren't going to go out because totally the top ticket was just not right for them. They didn't see the hope in that election for Mayor. The only thing that

people were going out for was me, and my folk--the City Council folk--were not as interested in the City Council as they were in the Mayor's race. With all those blacks getting in there and infuriating them in the Mayor's race, they said, just forget it, and the black turn-out was that low.

The white turn-out was low because they knew Hackett was going to win, and when people know that you are going to win and there is nothing really to fight for, they don't go out.

So I got in my car and rode out to the black community with a girl who would drive me around, and we looked, and it was just pitiful. I said: "I'll tell you where I want to go. I want to go out here by Colonial School because I taught out there, and if I have any white friends, they've got to be out there." [Laughter] So we started down Park, and the girl said she had to stop for some gas. Just as we drove in to stop for some gas, we heard a horn honking. A white man, an elderly man and his wife said: "Minerva, we are for you. We are on our way now. Listen, you are going to get this thing, and you are going to get it because all of my friends say you are going to get it. We are going to pick up another couple, and we are on our way to vote."

And just as we drove on down the street, there were two others saying, "Minerva, we are for you." White--all down Park. We got into the Colonial area and turned down Colonial Road to come to Colonial School just to see how the turn out was. I could see the response from people I had actually taught their children or their grandchildren. I could see

it. It was just a feeling. We rode on over there by Galloway Park--Galloway Golf Course--over there behind Park, and Marge Thrasher, of all people, was coming out of her voting booth down there by the Galloway Golf Course. Marge said, "Minerva, you are going to win this thing; I feel it in the air; you are going to get so many votes over here, and everybody is talking about you."

I just felt it. I came back, and I called Gerald. Gerald had a new story to tell. Gerald said, "Minerva, you have made the miracle." I asked him how he knew, and he said: "Because the absentee ballots have been counted--I am not supposed to tell you this--but you know something, you won two to one in the absentee ballots. If that trend holds on, you are going to win this thing with about forty per cent of the white vote."

ALMA BUCOVAZ: And that is what you won by, wasn't it?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: We had about thirty-nine per cent of the white vote. It was simply amazing. Russell Sugarmon came up to my campaign office because he had been at home watching on TV and feeling that I was going to loose it by looking at the black turn-out. Russell came on up there I guess to console me. On the wall, we had to write down the returns, and the Frayser return came in and I was getting thirty-three per cent of the vote. Russell said: "Minerva, this is impossible! This is impossible! [Laughter] I don't believe this. You are getting thirty-three per cent of the white vote in Frayser; you are

getting thirty-three per cent out there in Fox Meadows. These are your conservative white areas. If you are doing that well there..."

Then, Marge Thrasher's area came in, and we had forty-four per cent of the white vote over there at Galloway. My best vote came from my upper middle class whites in the Poplar Corridor area. I was getting forty-three, forty-four, forty-one per cent of the vote. It was unbelievable.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Do you know what the Memphis Magazine said? It was in February, they said: ". . .the race against David Hill was probably the most bizarre in recent Memphis history. The gamblers would have had to make Hill a heavy favorite in this citywide contest between a black female--one hated by the Fords at that--and an attractive, progressive, successful white businessman."

MINERVA JOHNICAN: That's right. And a nice guy too; a really nice person, and [Hill] was a gentlemen, too, all the way through the campaign. That is true.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: And you truly served at-large.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: I thought, Alma Ruth, that it was very important that I won that race because this is another episode in the Ford machine. People just weren't going to take the dictatorship, and this was a continuing of the downfall that is happening now. People are changing. Either people are interested in politics or they are disinterested. And people were at a peak time. They had

become disinterested, then I became a bright hope for them because here was something they could fight against--the way Minerva Johnican was used as a tool.

A lot of the black Ford supporters were saying that I was used as a tool by the white community. This is not true. I got more black votes--black votes actually put me in--but white votes were the cutting edge. The truth of the matter was that I was a tool, but I was a tool for the people. I prefer to think that I was a tool for the people to send back a message loud and clear that we are not going to tolerate dictatorial politics in the City of Memphis, whether it be black or white. We just are not going to stand for it. I was a victory for the people. I was a people's victory. Blacks who didn't like the dirty politics voted for Minerva and fought for her. Whites who didn't like the dirty politics voted for her and fought for her. Now, whether the whites were racists, or whether they didn't like the Fords, or whatever, the fact was that they were still saying we are not going to be dictated to by political bosses. I don't mind being a tool, but I was a tool for the people. I was the people's way of saying we aren't going to take this any more, and we won. That was important.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: How long did you serve on the City Council?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: I served on the City Council one term, one full term, four years. I took the oath of office January 1, 1984, and served until December 31, 1987.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: I guess if you wanted to select one thing that you are most proud of, would that be the neighborhood organization?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: 'Building Bridges' could have really been a dynamic organization. Again, we had the opposition of the politicians. You see, politicians are very jealous animals. They are fearful of people power, and that is what Building Bridges was, people power. We brought Republicans and Democrats, black and whites, poor and rich to meetings. They actually came down to the City Council and had their meetings, and broke up into committees, voiced their opinions on issues, and made a voice to the City Council on what they thought those issues should be.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Do you think, Minerva, that this is another one of those shifts? Just as we saw the shift in the racial understanding of people as a whole, and as you said, there were both white and black ministers marching together prior to King's assassination.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: That is true.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: This is the shift. We have always had political representation in our country, which usually meant some strong politician sort of dictating to the little fellow what he was supposed to have. We saw a shift about that time to citizen participation instead of citizen representation. You helped them to participate.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Well, they wanted to participate. People are frustrated. That is why we

don't have the large voter turn-out all over America. That is why you see [the same] politicians serve year after year. I couldn't sit in a City Council seat for twenty years, you know, and not do anything. I like to make things happen, move on to the next one, and shove on to another position. People don't understand that, but that is what politics should be about. You don't sit on the Congress for twenty years, draw a pension, and that is it. You are thinking more of the pension than you are actually thinking of your mission. You don't sit on the City Council for all that time, or sit on the County Commission all that time, and never go down in history as ever doing anything really positive for the people.

'Building Bridges' was an opportunity for people participation. That is what we need--participatory government--that is what I call it, participatory government. It was a beginning, Alma Ruth, and you won't believe how they fought it. All of the City Councilmen tried to fight it. The Mayor tried to fight it. Other politicians wouldn't come to anything we had. It was just that they didn't like the idea that we were getting people together; that is a threat to them.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Were they afraid that they would lose control and the power of making the decisions?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: That is true.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Or were they fearful that the people weren't capable of representing?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: I think that they are afraid that people are capable.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Are they afraid of the capability of people?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: You don't want to start having them thinking, because once they decide what they really think, then wait a minute, these people might think I am not doing anything up here, and they might vote me down. And that is true. When people start thinking and seeing how the government works, then they start looking at why it is not happening with some other elected officials.

You know, I am the kind of person who has a lot of public press. I even get it now, and I am not even in office. But I got a lot of public press, and the reason why I got it is because I work good with news people. News people used to come to me and say, "Minerva, we know that you are going to have something interesting to tell us, what do you think about this?" They like news-worthy folk, and they consider me newsworthy. And being newsworthy, you can set a tone. When you set that tone, you can get people involved. It is just personalities. It has a lot to do with personalities, and people know when you have a commitment. People know when you really are concerned about their well being. They know that. They can smell it.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: They sense sincerity?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes. So the Building Bridges did quite a few things. It could have done

more, but the City Council wanted to cut us out of the budget. A great part of our budget was being able to communicate with our voters. Through communication, we had to have money to mail. We had to have postage capital. The City Council had given each one of us so much money we could use to mail letters each year. Well, I found a way to beat that system. The way to do it was to find those City Councilmen who didn't do any mailing, that had been sitting there twenty years, and didn't care what the people knew. As a matter of fact, they thought you don't need to let the people know more.

I said: "Hey, Bob James, if you aren't going to use any mailing list this month, can I use what you have, your prorata? [Laughter] If you let me use the prorata you have and mail this, then when you want to mail . . ." Now I knew he never would because Bob wasn't that kind of person who did a lot of mailing. "Can I use yours this month?" And that doubled what I needed, and so therefore I could still do it. They found out that I was doing that, so they cut the mailing altogether.

They didn't want the people to know. The whole thing was don't tell the people anything. We don't want them to do anything but have blinders on and vote for us for re-election. That is all they wanted.

It was a big fight down at City Hall. We got all the Building Bridges people to come down in the audience, and when the budget came up and they tried to cut the mail for

us, I made the statement to the people from my seat on the City Council. I said: "There is a move today by my fellow City Council people to really cut you all out of ever knowing what is going on in City government. They are going to take a vote, mind you, and when they take this vote, you won't know they are taking it. That is why I am interrupting now, Mr. Chairman, to let these people in the audience know that you are about to vote now--pro or con--for them to see, against the Building Bridges budget." Of course, you know they voted it down. [Laughter] But the people knew it, and the people got angry.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Who were the members of the Building Bridges organization?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: The Building Bridges organization was made up of neighborhood groups, different folk in various neighborhoods--people from Fox Meadows, Orange Mound, North Memphis, Binghampton, Parkway Village, Colonial Village--and different areas.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Were they interested in things that affected their individual neighborhoods?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: As a matter of fact, because of Building Bridges, we got some folk elected. Mary Rose McCormick is a product of Building Bridges. She was one of my Building Bridges Chairpersons. She got so much involved that she ran [for a seat on the City Council.] Mary Rose never thought she would be on the City Council, but by coming to Building Bridges meetings and

finding out how much the developers work against the neighborhood people, she decided that she was going to run to try to fight for the neighborhood folk. The battle started right over here in the Colonial-Park area. Buildings all up and down Park is where it really started. Mary Rose is one of the Building Bridges people.

A lot of people from this particular area--Sea Isle and Colonial-Park area--became very active in the Building Bridges program because they could see the constant move of developers coming into their area, taking away the neighborhood texture of their area, and bringing in large buildings.

It was quite interesting. Most of the Building Bridges was geared toward preserving their neighborhoods, taking care of their environment. They were concerned about streets and gutters, and R.H. vehicles parking in the neighborhoods. They attacked the problem that effected their immediate neighborhoods that nobody ever seemed to care about. They set a lot of new rules, policies, and procedures for them too.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Were you involved in the area of crime prevention with neighborhood watches?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Bill Gibbons really started the Neighborhood Watch program. He was going to start just a regular program, and I put the word 'comprehensive' in there. I thought it should be a

comprehensive, a total Neighborhood Watch City Program. I worked very closely with him on that because I knew that was needed. Of course, he caught the same kind of problems I caught. Neighborhood Watch was another people-involvement program, and of course, politicians didn't like Bill Gibbons doing that, so they fought him and fought his budget too. But that is natural in politics. It is nothing you can whine about or nurse your paws about. You know that is going to happen because politicians are jealous people, and especially the ones that don't want to work. So that is part of nature, and you learn how to accept that.

One of the things that I guess probably out of all of the battles that I ever had since I was an elected official that I didn't mention and one that I am most proud of is the proposal to build a new hospital in Memphis, which was called the Med. Boxtown I am proud of; Building Bridges I am proud of; helping do the Pyramid I am proud of (and I will tell you more about the Pyramid in a minute), but let's go back a little bit, Alma Ruth. When I was on the County Commission, one of the things that was probably most important to me was in 1980, 1979. There was a program or proposal to build a new hospital in Memphis, which we call the Med. That to me was probably the biggest fight I ever had.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: What was the organization? What type of medical care did the City have prior to the Med?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: We had the old hospital called John

Gaston. We called it indigent care, care for poor people. John Gaston was the old building, out of date, with no kind of real leadership, just a total mess, in all kinds of debt because we had no way of tapping money for indigents to get the care, no kind of certification system. People could walk in off the street and demand care, and we didn't even have a way to certify them to get Medicaid funds, Medicare funds. It was just totally a terrible system.

I had been on the Commission, and I had been hearing about the new hospital. They had been talking about it ever since I was elected in 1975. Just about 1979--in between '79 and '80--they decided we had to do something about it. So Mayor Morris had decided that we didn't need a public hospital. There was some real political stuff going on. The private hospitals didn't want a public hospital. The private hospitals--Saint Joseph, Baptist, and Methodist Hospitals--just didn't really want a public hospital.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: But did they take care of many indigent patients?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: No. We had John Gaston, and these private hospitals did not take care of indigents. Indigents couldn't even get in there, even though there were some Federal guildlines that said they had to take a certain proportion of poverty people, that just didn't happen. Nobody was really monitoring that. Federal Government, you know, only monitors what you call attention

to them to monitor. So there was really no monitoring at all. The hospitals were just running it the way they wanted to. The hospital system is still a very powerful, very powerful resource in this area.

Mayor Morris had come up with some decision--some ill-advised decision--that we should not build a new hospital. Abolish it; tear down John Gaston; contract with the private hospitals for indigent care. Now to me, that was probably the most disgraceful decision anyone could make, because here we are sitting in a city that was almost fifty per cent black, fifty per cent white, and about thirty-eight per cent of the blacks at that time were below the national poverty level.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: And probably uninsured too.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, that is right. Below the national poverty level, you know that they didn't have any insurance. So here you are talking about abandoning a public hospital. We just couldn't afford to. If there was some kind of real tragedy or an epidemic, with all of those poor people, we would be in trouble. It would almost be like the Yellow Fever days. So I knew that I had to do something.

I said, now, what can we do? We've got to do something. I got a call from a health care advocate, who happened to be white, who worked at U.T., but didn't want anyone to know what was happening, or didn't want anyone to know what he was doing. He called and he said, "Minerva, I sat in a meeting

today and there are going to be plans, and there is going to be a motion on the agenda today to abolish the plans for the new hospital, and there is going to be a vote to contract with the private hospitals for indigent care, and that could be the most disastrous thing that ever happened in Memphis."

Right after that call, almost immediately, I got a call from a female doctor--a female physician at U.T.--who was totally angry; she was totally disturbed. Dr. Iris something. I don't know where she is now. She really caught my attention because she was so committed. I understand she was probably one of the most committed doctors we have ever had that came from U.T. She told me she wanted to have lunch with me. That was just before the County Commission meeting. We were going to meet at 1:30 p.m., and she wanted to have lunch with me. I went ahead and grabbed a sandwich with her. She said: "Minerva, you all have got to stop it. I didn't know who to call, but I called a woman because women understand these things. When Jim Rout brings that thing up, you protest. How can he just bring it up without bringing it through committee?"

I said: "He is not supposed to. They are trying to trick us, but I will stop it." So I went back and I told Walter Bailey, I said, "Walter, we've got to stop this." Walt said we will be ready. When Jim Rout brought it up, I protested, and Walt seconded it. The rule says that if a County Commissioner protests about something that has not been discussed at committee meeting, it has to be shelved. So, we

got it shelved. He was going to bring it up in two more weeks, but during those two weeks, we had our homework to do.

I got with Dr. Diggs. I don't know whether Dr. Diggs is still living--the older; the father--Dr. Diggs. Dr. Diggs called me and we got together. I said, "Dr. Diggs, we've got to do something." He said: "We have got to get some health care advocates. Minerva, let me tell you one thing you don't do." He was a kindly old gentleman.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Dr. Diggs was very influencial in sickle cell anemia research at University of Tennessee.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Sickle cell, that's right. He was the one that called me, he and his wife, he and Mrs. Diggs. They said, "We've got the Red Cross Building." His son became involved in this. Dr. Iris (I don't remember Iris' last name)--a female, heavy set, older lady doctor, head of the John Gaston Hospital, or head of the physicians part of the hospital--was a very dedicated person; everybody loved her. She was a surgeon. They said, "What you can't do, Minerva, don't let this become a black-white issue." They said, "Because The Commercial Appeal is going to make it [a black-white issue], and once they make that the issue, we have lost before we begin." I said, O.K. She said, "Now Reverend James Smith has got the Union over there; now keep them quiet."

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Was the University of Tennessee for or against it as an institution?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Dr. Farmer was for it, but he was just

like waxing and waning with the times. Dr. Farmer would be for it one day, and against it the next day. He didn't know what to do. He was on the committee that originally brought up the idea. U.T. got the idea of the new hospital along with the County Commission Committee and John Ford Canale. John Ford Canale was very much for it. He sort of controlled Dr. Farmer and kept him in line, but when Dr. Farmer would go to a meeting with those private hospitals, he would start changing. [Laughter] But Dr. Farmer basically was for it.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: But did the institution have a policy for or against it?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: It did have?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: They had the committee, where they have all the doctors, and they had adopted that new hospital, but then they started waxing and waning. You see, the politics started going, then Dr. Farmer left right at the heel of it. But we finally got them to approve. Well, the first thing we did, we called a meeting of health care advocates. We made it a point that we kept that committee almost seventy-five per cent white.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: So it wasn't a black-white issue?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: We didn't want it to be. Purposely, we didn't want it to be, because if we had allowed it to become a black and white issue, we would have lost it before we won. We didn't need that. We wanted it to be an issue purely of

health care for poor people and for the city. If we don't have good health care for poor people, then our health care will go up. So we had to make sure that it was a health care issue.

So we got health care advocates, and Dr. Diggs helped me find them. We sat down and brain-stormed names and pulled them together. We met at the Red Cross. We made a decision that we were going to meet every Monday night at the Red Cross Building, and every Monday night we would discuss our issues and get our plans together. We named ourselves the Shelby County Health Care Coalition--another coalition.

We went to work. I learned more in that little time about health care than I had ever known in all my life, because I was surrounded by health care advocates. We sent for a professor from U.C.L.A. that had written the book on public health care that U.T. was using in their first course for their freshmen. We sent for that doctor. He was a Polish doctor. I don't remember his name now, but we brought him to Memphis--paid for his way out of our pockets--we put our money out of our pockets and brought him here, the Health Care Coalition did.

We held a public seminar out at the Board of Education and invited all of these folk out here. He was great. Of course, they called him a flaming liberal and all kinds of names, 'intellectual egghead,' and all kinds of names they called him. But he took care of himself. He could handle himself well. We finally worked so hard, with him helping

us, that we got us a stand on why there should be a public hospital, and why there should be a new one, and why we should build the whole plan, and why we should build it as planned.

About this time, we were starting to win the support of the public. Gradually we started winning support of The Commercial Appeal. I was just the catalyst for all of this, but my part in it became so important that I was called in by The Commercial Appeal while I was in Washington, D.C. I was invited to the White House for some SALT II Treaty Meeting--a briefing at least--and the reporter called me and had me call her back from the White House to tell what I thought of what Dr. Farmer had said. Dr. Farmer had gotten real lackadaisical on this thing. He was getting so much pressure, and he couldn't uphold and stand up for what he had originally planned. I had to chastise Dr. Farmer to get back into the ball game. [Laughter] The reporter contacted me in Washington through the White House.

It was just a real hard issue. We got people involved. Of course, I used my only way that I know how to inform people through the form of letters. I wrote them letters and told them that the vote would be coming up after about five or six months of just hardball politics; winning some battles, losing some.

The people who were mostly hospital providers were against building the hospital. The ones who were the hospital users, and the people who worked in the hospital

were for building the hospital. We called ourselves the Shelby County Health Care Coalition. We had about five members on a board of about twenty-five, so we were out numbered, but we were strong. So our five members called themselves the Shelby County Health Care Coalition Representatives, and they turned in a minority report. We did a minority report. They did a majority report. Two reports were submitted to the City Council. The majority report was submitted by the Mayor's Committee, made up mostly of health care providers. Our minority report was submitted by the Health Care Coalition, made up of users, those people who worked in the hospital, and health care advocates.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: What was the Mayor's stand?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: The Mayor was against it, against the hospital. The Mayor and Jim Rout were against it. They have made a zero complete turn now, but then they were against it. All of the black Commissioners plus Stephen Cohen and Charles Perkins were for it.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Was Jim Rout the County Commissioner Chairman of Health Care at that time?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, and Jim was against it. He was against it. He was thoroughly convinced by Mayor Morris that we should not build a hospital. That was the first big fight I had with Jim Rout. I never will forget Jim Rout said: "You people who represent the minority report keep saying 'quality health care.' Just what is

quality health care?" I said: "Mr. Chairman, if you please. Mr. Rout, let me tell you what quality health care is in simple layman's terms. Here we have a man over here who is very wealthy; he has cancer; it is terminal; he needs certain kinds of equipment and certain kinds of medicine and certain kinds of care. Here we have a poor person over here who has cancer; he needs the same care. That is what we mean by quality health care." [Laughter] Jim got so mad at me. I said, "It is very simple; quality health care means keeping a person alive with the best by all means possible no matter what it costs."

It went into a big fight. Every week, every time we had a County Commission meeting, it was going on. It was held off because nobody knew where it was standing. So finally, we got down to June 1st. I will never forget. It was a big day to vote on this thing whether it was up or down. The newspapers had come out for us, and we had everything going our way but the votes. We knew we had four black votes and possibly one white vote, which was five. The County Commission was made up of eleven. So that meant that six votes could defeat us. We didn't know where Charley Perkins stood on this issue, but we had worked on him.

So the night before on May 31st, we called a meeting. Steve Cohen met with me, Don Donati, and someone who was on the committee, but I am not sure now who it was. Maybe it was Mr. Diggs, Dr. Diggs' son. We met over at Don Donati's house, who was an attorney in Memphis who had mostly

supported health care advocates. Don Donati said, "Oh my God." I told the group that Vasco was over at Dr. Farmer's house along with John Ford Canale. They were trying to wrap everything up over there. We couldn't meet together because of some sunshine law, and really Steve Cohen and I weren't supposed to be there at the same time, but we said to hell with it, we've got to get this thing done. So Steve and the rest of us were over at Don's house, and we were on the phone talking to the other group trying to make sure that Dr. Farmer agreed with everything that we needed, and that we were going to take this thing to the Council next day and get our votes.

Oh, Charley Perkins was over there with Vasco. We had our votes lined up. Vasco, Charley Perkins, Dr. Farmer, and John Ford Canale agreed on everything, but there was one sticky point. Mr. Lipes, who was then the administrator at the hospital . . .

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Lipes? The administrator at John Gaston?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Lipes, yes. Lipes was over there with us. So they called Lipes, and they said, "We've got everything going." Lipes said: "There is one thing you don't have; we have a problem. We do not have an agreement with the Union in the surgical room--something about the surgical part of it--and that is very important to the Union. If we go in there without that, we are going to blow it." Vasco said, "Hell, we've got something we can work

with, later we can . . ." Jim Smith was head of that Union. Well, one thing I knew about a coalition is that you can't leave anybody out of that coalition. Regardless of the games Jim Smith played, we can't leave anyone out of the coalition. A coalition takes care of all of their components.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Or it will fall?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: It will fall. Mr. Lipes said, "Minerva, we are going to have a problem." It was about 12:00 o'clock midnight. He said he didn't know what to do. I said, "Well, let me call Jim Smith on the phone." I called him at home, and I said, "Jim, we got a working plan, but we got one little problem and that is the surgical unit in Bowld Hospital."

Tape 2; Side 2.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: So Lipes said: "Minerva, I am going to depend on you. I've got to go home and go to bed. My wife is going to leave me if I don't go home." We had been there all day Sunday. I said: "Mr. Lipes, I have called Jim Smith, and I am going to stay on up and meet him out at the Pancake House--me and Steven and Don are going to meet him out there--and we are going to wrap this thing up. You go on to bed, and in the morning at 9:30, we will meet you down at the County Commission and try to tie this part of it up." Vasco and them said they were through with it; that was it. I meet Jim Smith out there, and Jim Smith worked out a solution how we could do it.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Did you work out a plan to get the Union to agree?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: The surgical unit, the nurses or the Union members who worked in the surgical unit at Bowld Hospital.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: To approve your plan?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes. You see, U.T. wasn't willing to work with that Union, but it was something in there that they had to do. So, we worked that out and got ready for the big vote. We met in the Council chambers. I had written letters to just about everybody I knew I could write to in order to pack those chambers. I said, "Now, don't be hostile, just be supportive." I remember I told them that this is a chance for people to really take part and help make a decision, and the people were there.

John Ford Canale, of course, is very conservative. He was really frightened, and he said, "Minerva, you've got too many people here." [Laughter] "Those people are going to be protesting and mess it up." It was a situation where we were on egg shells. I said, "John, don't worry; nobody is going to talk out loud; nobody is going to holler; Reverend Starks is a spokes-person; he knows how to handle it; it is going to be perfect." Everybody was down there--black and white--we had a beautiful room, a beautiful coalition of people down there. So the vote started coming up. We got to the vote, and Jim Rout made the decision that a clandestine meeting was held last night.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Clandestine, implying that you had broken the sunshine law?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: He said, "A clandestine meeting was held that I know of, and decisions were made, and I don't appreciate it, and none of us appreciate it, but regardless, we are going to beat you any way."

I said, "Mr. Rout, we are ready for you." [Laughter] You see, Charley Perkins had completely come over to us, so then we had our six votes with Charley Perkins. We had Steve Cohen, Minerva, Vasco, Jesse, and Walt, so the votes were there. We were almost sure. We didn't know but what Charley might change. We went to our discussion, and everything was fine. We thought we were ready to take the vote. We just knew everything was perfect. Then, Charley came in there and said, "Well, after looking over this thing, I don't think we need to complete the whole hospital, we can just build . . ." You see there were three parts. You've seen the Med, haven't you?

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Yes.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: He said: "We can leave off one part, and that would take away so many beds and so many of the I.C.Us. Then we would just have two parts, Charley said, I think that would work fine." Everybody was going; Vasco was ready to give in. I went out there and talked to my people, and they said: "Oh, no, no, no! We go with all of the hospital as planned or none." I said, "Steve, what do you think?" Steve said, "Minerva, let's

hold; if we don't hold on this one, we will never get it." I said, "Well, I'm ready to hold." Then, Steve said, "Yea, well, if we hold, we might lose it." And I said, "No, we won't loose it; let's hold; let's hold; it will give me a week to work on Charley."

So, they called for the vote. There was a five to five tie with one abstaining. Charley abstained because he wasn't ready to go with us, and he wasn't ready to go with the ax plan, and he wasn't ready to go with the rest of the folk and not beat them. Charley told me that.

I said: "Mr. Chairman, if we can't build the hospital as planned--that was planned by the University of Tennessee doctors, who know what they are talking about; that was planned by health care advocates, who know what they are talking about, and people who are experts--we can't arm-chair out here and dictate how the health care in this city should be. We are not experienced in that field. For us to sit up here and say arbitrarily we are going to cut off a whole part, how do we know what we are cutting off? What is the need of doing the hospital if you don't have enough I.C.U.? I.C.U. is the main thing we're building it for--intensive care, or what ever you call it."

That was the main thing we were building it for. That was the big need, and now here we were talking about cutting out the Burn Center, now we were talking about cutting out the Trauma Center. What is the need of just building some beds; we might just as well build dormitories. I said: "Mr.

Chairman, I can not go along with this. I can not compromise my principles for what we decided we were going to build, that we have been talking about building for nine years. We may loose this battle, but I would rather loose with some honor and some principles than to loose by giving up the whole ship. I am just not going to do it."

Charley said, "Minerva, you may be defeating this thing." I said, "Mr. Chairman, if that is what it has to be, then it has to be, but we came down here to fight for the whole hospital, and we need to do it." So, they called the vote off that week. Vasco said, "Oh, Minerva, you have ruined it." Well, I knew we had to work. We had another week to work. We called for a meeting the next week. We went in there--my same folk all of them came back--we went in there and voted that thing up, and it was beautiful.

Now, that to me was the most interesting battle I have ever had. It was a learning experience. It was a hard-fought battle. I mean really a hard-fought battle, and I believe today that it paid off. Now, we still have some problems with the hospital. I understand that we still have some problems, debt-wise, but it is because the certification unit has never been completely structured as it should have been. We are not certifying people. They have not put enough money into certifying people like they should.

I talked long distance to the man--the deputy at the time--who was the president or the director of the University of Denver General Hospital. Denver had a public facility

that had some of the same problems that we had, and they revamped theirs. They took it away from the University, which is what I advocated that we should probably do. I got a lot of opposition from that, but I did it because of the fact that U.T. had more concern for Bowld, and they were just using the other part of the hospital for their own experimentation. Bowld was their special hospital that they would put their most important patients in, and the rest of it was just a means of keeping the University with a training hospital. That's all it was, training. They weren't trying to do anything, and I guess they shouldn't have. It wasn't their obligation to make the city hospital a success.

It was the obligation of the Commission and those people who were supposed to be working in the administration of the hospital to make sure that we had a good administrator and to make sure that we were getting every possible patient we can in there. For example, the majority of patients who were coming who didn't pay were the Medicaid patients. Well, the majority of the folk in John Gaston, or the Med, were Medicaid. We were losing the Medicare patients. We weren't getting Medicare. There should have been an outreach program for us to bring Medicare people into that Med.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Because Medicare pays, and that is Federally funded?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes. Methodist was getting all the Medicare money; Saint Joseph was getting all the Medicare money; Baptist was getting the Medicare

money, and the Med wasn't. We didn't have an outreach program. We weren't going out there and getting those people; we weren't trying to get them into the Med. With the new hospital, that should have been the main thrust, and that was to get some Medicare people who are paying people.

The other thing that we thought we should do was to have a certification unit similar to the one in Denver. Years after I left, the County Commission went to Denver and looked at theirs, trying to get it. But I was advocating that back in the early 1980s. Go to Denver. I told Dr. Farmer that--go look at the Denver hospital. No, Dr. Hunt had come in then, I think. I told Dr. Hunt that. Go look at the Denver Hospital. Look at what they have to offer, and then why don't we try to do a program that is similar.

Denver was getting thirty per cent of their patients in their public hospital were paying patients, paying patients with hospital insurance. People preferred to come there because it was a good hospital, thirty per cent. They had certification. They were certifying almost all of the people coming to their hospital. Very few people came off the streets that they didn't find some way to certify them to get some funds or Federal funds. We get people off the streets, and we can't locate Medicare for them; we can't locate supplemental Social Security; we can't locate anything.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Isn't part of the problem because they are coming from different states?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes, different states. But we didn't

have any certification. We should have a link up with certification, and we still don't have that kind of certification unit yet. I think they will never have it until they realize that the University is not supposed to do that. The hospital administrator is supposed to make that happen. It is interesting.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: It is very interesting that you were able to save or salvage a very important entity in society, and that is health care for a large percentage of people in Memphis.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Another thing I say, Alma Ruth, and I am not a selfish person, and that is that I wasn't the cause of all that happening. I was there. I was able to be the catalyst; I had friends. I think the main reason why we were able to do something--when I say we, we are the Health Care Coalition--was because the Health Care Coalition saw me as a person they could use in that coalition. I saw them as experts that could help me become a better representative for the people. We equally saw where we could help each other, and we used it. So many times politicians try to be 'know-it-all.' I didn't know anything about health care. All I know is that when I got sick, I needed some.

But I did know, in simple terms, that a city as large as Memphis needed a good health care system that poor people could go to, because if they didn't have it, we are in a very dangerous position. I did know that. But because of health

care advocates like Dr. Diggs and the doctor I spoke of, the lady doctor, Dr. Iris (I can't remember her last name) and other people like Dr. Farmer, and those folk, because they were there to give me that advice, and because I sought it, and because we had people from California who came in, and the man who was Director of the University of Denver General would talk to me on the phone, and because I sought that expertise, and because the Shelby County Health Care Coalition sought that expertise and brought it together, we were able to be a voice for people that didn't know how to be a voice for themselves. That was important.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: So in this case, you reversed. Instead of going to the people to get their ideas, you went to the experts in order to serve the people at-large.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes. For a long time in health care discussions about the hospital, people weren't responding because they didn't know what we were talking about. And in so many issues that I saw while I served in a position on the City Council as well as the County Commission, people weren't concerned because they didn't understand the issues. The newspapers weren't educating the people because the reporters they sent out didn't understand it either.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Then part of a politician's responsibility is to educate the people?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Educate the people, absolutely. We did

it in Boxtown; we did it here with the hospital situation. Before we got through with that hospital, a lot of people knew just how important it was that we maintain a public facility in Memphis. They knew that. Black and white people, even people who could afford it--those persons who had good insurance and knew that they were going to Methodist--also knew that it was very important that we have that public hospital there for people that didn't have insurance. If we didn't have a facility for them, we would all be in trouble.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Yes, because cancer or a communicable disease does not know the difference between the person who has insurance and the one that doesn't.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: That's right. And the other thing, too, is that our insurance goes up. Our insurance goes up. It doesn't matter if we had an epidemic here in Memphis and only the poor people who didn't have insurance caught the disease. We who have insurance would find that our insurance would go up because there are too many people demanding that care.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: It seems to me, Minerva, that you've been first in so many things. One thing, you were first in your relationship to the way you looked at politics. When I say first, perhaps I should say different, in the way you viewed your political position and the political power you had. Then, of course, you were also

first in other things, such as the National Association of Counties Board of Directors.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Let me tell you a little bit about that. It is very interesting. Of course, you know I was the first woman to serve on the County Commission. I used to be a Squire. [Laughter] They used to call the members of the County Court Squires, then they changed the name, and now it is called the County Commission, but I was the first woman there.

I was one of the first women nationally to serve on the board, and that is a very prestigious board. We called it NACO, which stood for National Association of County Officials. [Now it is called NACo, which stands for National Association of Counties.] This is an association of county elected officials. It is the executive lobbying group for counties all over America. I was put on the committee in 1978, and I served about two or three years. I think there were only three black women on that committee out of about seven women, period. There just weren't many women. It was a committee of fifty across the nation. The men had just about held all of the spots until the year we formed another coalition.

I was one of the people that formed a coalition--the women and the blacks--formed a coalition to get some seats. A black lady from Flint, Michigan was going to be the President of NACO. She had maneuvered two or three years before I got there to be the only black woman on the body.

It was popular then to elect a black woman to become President, so she was going to be President. One of her goals was that if she was going to be President, she wanted to see some more women and some blacks on the committee, so she submitted my name. Of course, you had to go through your state. She just couldn't arbitrarily put me on there; she had to submit who she wanted to a state committee, which in my case was an affiliate of the national association--the Tennessee County Services Association. Once she did that, then they supported me.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Weren't you President of that?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: I was President of the Tennessee County Commission Association. Mine was an arm of this Association. You see, there were several arms of the Tennessee County Services Association. In Tennessee, there was an association for the Mayors, and one for the Trustees, and various kinds of officials. We had about eight different arms that were up under the whole umbrella of the Tennessee County Services Association. I was President of the Tennessee Counties Commissioners' Association. The parent organization was the National Association of County Officials.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Then you were also the first black woman ever to be considered a serious candidate for Mayor in a major city.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes. No black woman has been considered a serious candidate. I think

there have been some people who never had a chance of winning who have run, but people didn't know them very well. At least one ran that I know about. I think she got about eighty votes. But I was the first serious black woman candidate, one who had been known in politics, one who had served as a County Commissioner and as a City Councilperson, who had won an at-large position. I think Pat Vander Schaaf was probably the first serious white woman in Memphis to run for Mayor; however, when Pat ran, she only got about 5,000 votes. When I ran for Mayor, I got 39,000--close to 40,000--votes.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Were you not second?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: I was second behind incumbent Mayor Hackett, out of a field of six candidates. Yes. A lot of people look at that and say, "Huh, Minerva didn't do too well." But when you look at that campaign, you have to look at several things. First, I was a woman, and that is very hard in a southern city when you think that men, or many times women, will not vote for a woman as Mayor of a city. That is hard. To get 40,000 votes--I think Mayor Hackett got 63,00 or something like that, and he won it because he got that many votes--and for me to have been able to muscle up that many votes with probably the lowest budget of all of them, it is not bad. I think Bill Gibbons, who came in third with 20,000 or 23,000 votes, spent about $350,000, and I think my budget was less than $70,000. [Laughter]

ALMA BUCOVAZ: And there were so many candidates, too.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Mayor Hackett spent over one-half million dollars on his campaign. And I got nearly 40,000 votes with $70,000 and with terrible opposition. I ran against many of the black male politicians in the City. They just couldn't stand it; they couldn't stand up. The audacity that a woman would dare go out there and run for Mayor, especially a black woman. [Laughter] So it was really something, and it takes guts to do what I did. I did it and I am proud of our campaign.

I think we could have possibly gone into a runoff with the Mayor had we had just enough money, but of course, the money wasn't there because I was a woman, in the first place, in a society that traditionally thinks that women should be home in the kitchen cooking. They just weren't going to put that kind of money behind me. I know the next time before I get out there in any kind of race, I'll have to have my money way before I get into the campaign.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Do you foresee in the future a possible political race?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: I haven't ruled it out. I have not ruled out seeking another political office, but right now, I am interested in economic development. I have served in elected positions for twelve years, and now I would like to concentrate on another very important issue. I think that economic development--especially black economic development--in Memphis has got to be. We have got to make a change. There hasn't been any

real black economic development in Memphis since Maceo Walker established the Tri-State Bank and Universal Life Insurance Company. We can't think of another million dollar or more business going on here, and that is a sad story.

I am not rich. As a matter of fact, I am almost poor. But the fact remains: if I could have been a catalyst for Boxtown to make things happen in Boxtown; if I was able to be a catalyst for the Med Hospital to become a reality; if I was able to be a catalyst for Building Bridges and pulling black and white citizens in this City, who never would have spoken to each other in the past or worked with each other and because of some politician race-baiting probably thought they hated each other; if I could have been a catalyst to pull those people together and sit them at tables and have them working on neighborhood problems for each other; if I could be that catalyst to make the Pyramid become a dream, and then some more folk get it and make it a reality; if I could do all that, maybe I can be a catalyst to make some black economic development start here. If that is true, if I can hold hands with Mayor Hackett--who was an opponent of mine--and if he can see through Minerva Johnican that maybe we can make some things happen, then I am willing, because political power is no stronger than the economic power. If we don't have them both, then this City is still mired in politics. Memphis is a poor city, and until we can make some real economic development and some change in the lives of some of the people here in Memphis, especially in the black community, then we are still going to have our problems.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: You mentioned one thing--we don't have much more time--but we have to get into one more thing. You mentioned that the Pyramid was your idea to begin with, or that you were again the catalyst that started this project.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: [Laughter] Let me tell you about the Pyramid. I hope I can make this short and sweet, but I think this is very important for history to record things right. About in 1983 or 1984--well maybe, I am not sure when they came to me, maybe 1985, I think it was '85--some young men came to me. That was Brent Hartz and another young man named Barnett (I have forgotten his first name). But Brent had called me on the phone and said, "Minerva, I would like for you to see something I got; I need to talk to you; I am very disgusted." I said, "What is the matter?" He said, "I have a project that is just fantastic and I want you to see it." I said, "When can you come down?" And he said, "I am on my way down there."

So he came down to the City Council and he was very disturbed. He said: "I have a project in the Mayor's office, and he is not doing anything with it. He has not moved on it, and he has had it about four or five months. I want to take it. I want to get it out of there and let you see it, and see if you can help me make it go." I said: "O.K., but of course you know if you take it from the Mayor's office and bring it down here to the Council, it is very likely that you may not get this project off the ground. Because, it just

doesn't work that way in politics. The Mayor doesn't let councilmen tell him what to do." He said: "Well, I don't care. I have waited long enough. Would you listen to me and look at it?"

Brent Hartz went up and got the project from the Mayor and brought it down to me. It was a picture of a golden pyramid. Instead of the gray aluminum composition that they have changed it to now, it was going to be gold, sort of a gold coppertone-type thing. It was going to be built on the bluff rather than down there behind the Convention Center. It was beautiful.

He had drawn it, and he had the design plus he had a floor plan of how it would look on the inside. He had proposed it to be an arena-type of hall that could hold in there the Memphis Egyptian Museum and possibly some other things like maybe a trade center where we would absolutely trade with third-world countries. The idea was fantastic. I fell in love with it. I said: "Brent, this has got to be the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I think this is going to be what is going to kick Memphis off into the next century. This can be like the flagship, a new beginning for our City." We just fell in love with it.

I called Barbara Sonnenburg in. I called Bill Gibbons, Bill Davis, and some of the Councilmen who were around, and J. O. Patterson. Everybody loved it. Of course, I think at that point, Mayor Hackett was just a little bit afraid to take the Pyramid to the people for fear they may laugh at

him. See, people are afraid of new ideas. He had balked; he had held it back.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Was this before the Ramessee exhibit?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Yes.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: He hadn't had the success of the Ramessee exhibit.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: When was the Ramessee exhibit? 1987? Yes? Oh, this was way before that; way before. This thing was about late 1985. It was 1985 because I had worked on it for at least about six or seven months before anyone even started listening.

I said, "Brent, what do you want me to do?" He said, "Minerva, let's take it public." I said: "O.K., let me think now. This is beautiful. We've got to show it to some folk." I took it and showed it to A. W. Willis; he loved it. Then I showed it to Art Gilliam down at WLOK Radio Station, and he loved it. Then, I went over to the Peabody and showed it to Gary Belz. Gary Belz was crazy about it. Then we drove down to The Commercial Appeal and saw David Wayne Brown, who used to be the Editor. I said, "David, you've got to see this." David saw it and said, "Minerva, this is fantastic." I said, "David, this is what Memphis needs."

ALMA BUCOVAZ: And it had been hidden in the Mayor's office?

MINERVA JOHNICAN: The Mayor had just put it down, and he just wasn't ready to go public with it because he was afraid. People laugh. People have a

tendency to laugh at you when you bring things up, but I thought it was the most ideal thing that we could ever come up with. We got back to the office, and Brent said, "Minerva, what do you think?" I said: "You need a heavy to push this thing. I can't do it. It has got to be someone really heavy with development. I am just not the developer's best friend. Why don't we call John Tigrett?"

I just happen to have John Tigrett's phone number. He had been down to the City Council on something before. I think he had been fighting for the stadium, or something of that nature, and he had come down to the City Council. He saw me fighting for something he believed in, and he called me a tiger. He had given me his phone number. So I called John Tigrett, and I think the maid answered the phone and said that he was over in England--out of town--and I left the message for him to call me. I said: "Brent, when John Tigrett gets back--he will be back next week--why don't we set up a meeting and go see him and let him see it. I think he has the vision and the dreams to understand what this is all about."

We just casually started showing it to people that we thought could spark some interest. We took it down to Grisanti's on Beale, and he put a picture in his restaurant. We put pictures in several restaurants and autographed them. As a matter of fact, I autographed Ron Grisanti's myself. We finally got people to start talking about it. The press started talking about it.

We called a meeting. We went to Gary Belz, and Gary let us have a meeting at the Peabody in one of the rooms there. He didn't charge us anything, and we invited about fifty business people--so-called real estate folk--or people who would understand what the Pyramid could mean to Memphis. Just a publicity stunt to get it off the ground, and the press came. I was the speaker for that occasion. As a matter of fact, I was the speaker, and I endorsed the project and said that we are going to fight for it, and I was going to encourage Mayor Morris and Mayor Hackett to take this project and make it become a reality.

Then, it sort of died down. Mayor Morris started talking about building something on the Penal Farm. Hackett started talking about building something on the Fair Grounds. The whole idea was to divert the issue from what we were doing to something that sounds asinine and crazy. It went on for about a year with people talking.

Meanwhile, John Tigrett comes back. The fellows meet with John Tigrett, through the initiative of someone else who knew him better than I did. John Tigrett paid for a model plan, or helped them pay for a model plan, and they put it down at the Peabody. They started putting the model plan all around. It was a beautiful plan. I don't know whether you all ever saw it, or not. A beautiful plan of the Pyramid, a real model, a scale model. That called attention, and people started talking about it.

So just about this time, it started getting quite

comfortable for the Mayors of the City and County to start enhancing the project now, because we had done all of the dirty work. We had gone out there and taken the laughs. We had gone out there and take the jabs. And, he had gone out there and dared to show it to the people and be prepared for whatever they said. We had done all of that. The community accepted it. The press was writing about it. It was constantly going on. Some person came up saying, "Build it at the Fair Grounds." I just wrote every elected official I could find--my constant letter writing that I do--and told them it was just totally asinine to think about putting a pyramid in the middle of a city on the Fair Grounds. It had to be downtown. [Laughter]

I think that was about the last thing I did. I also did a taped interview. I interviewed the young fellows who did the first rendering of it on my Cable TV show. We talked about it enough to get it out there. So, we were still the catalyst to make people start thinking for it to happen.

You won't read in the newspaper now that we were the catalyst for the Pyramid. But if you go back and read The Commercial Appeal, back when we started talking about, you will see in the newspaper that we were the catalyst. If you go to the City Council and read through the minutes of the meetings, you will see we were the catalyst. But today, you won't see anywhere where we had anything to do with making the Pyramid become a reality. As a matter of fact, when they had the grand opening, I wasn't even invited. [Laughter]

And so, this is just how things go, but the fact remains that I think it is going to be built. It is going to happen. Even Mayor Hackett will remember that Minerva prodded him long and hard for that Pyramid. It is going to be a reality now, and I think it is going to be good for the City, contrary to some of the people who think that it is a waste of time. I really believe, and I may be wrong, but I believe the Pyramid is going to do some things for this City as far as tourism is concerned and putting us on the map.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: And giving us an identity.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: And giving us an identity. I really believe that.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: So many time, in all of our history, we have had some symbol and some identity. We have a flag that is representative of our country. Memphis has many things that align it with the Memphis in Egypt, and the Pyramid is one of those. Besides, it is supposedly going to serve some other purposes.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: That is right. And I think it is going to serve a lot of purposes. I really believe that. You know, we may have some lean days before we really see the fruition, but I believe it will become a symbol that is known all over the world.

I named it. When the boys brought it to me, they gave me the opportunity to name it. They said, "Minerva, you have done so much work, we want you to name it." I named it The Great Pyramid of Memphis; however, Mr. Schlenker came along

and he named it The Great American Pyramid. While I think The Great American Pyramid is fine, I think The Great Pyramid of Memphis was more of an identity for Memphis. I really wish we could have had that name.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Well, if it is very successful, I hope they put something there that identifies that Minerva Johnican did another first, as you have done in so many other instances.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: [Laughter] I doubt that; I doubt that, but at least we know; we know that. There is proof that we were the ones who ignited it off the ground. Brent Hartz knows that. I know it. Mayor Hackett knows it, and many of the people who we called to make it start happening know it. Even Mr. Tigrett knows it. However, they didn't invite me to the opening. [Laughter]

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Perhaps at the next opening.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Maybe they will remember us after they read our Oral History. [Laughter]

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Well, Minerva, if you can not think of some other thing, and I can not think of many things that could be more startling and significant historically than the things you have told us about this afternoon.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: To conclude, let me say, it has been a tremendous experience working in the political arena. It has been hard not working in it, not that

I miss the political arena so much, but I miss not having the challenge every day. I have a challenge now in trying to start an economic development center--a private center--that I hope will be another first for our City. We are just beginning and planning for it. It is a hard task. I hope that I am successful with it so I can be back here, probably next year, adding more to this history that we have been successful.

ALMA BUCOVAZ: Minerva, I really want to thank you. It has been my privilege to interview you today. You are an inspiration to me, especially at this time in the history of Memphis because you have accomplished so much. You have accomplished what certainly no other black woman has ever been able to do. In fact, no other woman has contributed as much to Memphis as you have. I thank you for permitting me to share with the world the history of Minerva Johnican.

MINERVA JOHNICAN: Thank you so much.

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